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DEAD of NIGHT

Fall/Winter, 1993

No. 8

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Nancy Kilpatrick

Steve Rasnic Tem

Lois Tilton

Plus
J.N. Williamson
Holiday
Supplement

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2 Dead of Night

FALL/WINTER, 1993

FICTION

Darkness On The Ice (novel excerpt)	Lois Tilton	4
Memories of el Dia de los Muertos	Nancy Kilpatrick	13
The Hunt	Steve Rasnic Tem	20
Tick	Richard F. McGonegal	23
Double Boogie	Rick Witherow	29
Urcheida	James S. Dorr	34
Dark Tide Rising	Sean Broderick	37
The Wreck at Wickhampton	Scott Thomas	41
Melancholy of Human Reflection	Charles M. Saplak	48

SPECIAL HOLIDAY SUPPLEMENT 50
3 Christmas Tales by
J.N. Williamson

You'd Better Watch Out	A Cautionary Tale	51
Snowlight	A Tale of Yuletide Terror	54
The Carolers	A Christmas Fantasy	57

DEPARTMENTS

Words From The Editor	Lin Stein	3
Grave Sight	J.N. Williamson	8
Book Reviews	Neal Hawes	16
Screen Scenes	Neal Hawes	33
Classifieds		63

WORDS FROM THE EDITOR

Lin Stein

When the calendar warns horror fans that autumn is just around the corner, their thoughts may turn to ways they might celebrate one of their favorite holidays: Halloween.

Of course, we think the best way to enjoy Halloween (as well as the "gothic" atmosphere of this entire time of year), is to curl up with a copy of *Dead of Night*. Then, cozy and warm, behind locked doors, let your imagination roam; and allow some of your favorite horror, fantasy, mystery and sci-fi writers to transport you to a realm where vampires and witches rule. . . a place where the undead share their dominion with ghouls, goblins, aliens. . . and even a few human monstrosities.

While the seasons of autumn and winter lend themselves particularly well to the enjoyment of frightening or macabre fiction, everyone who loves these genres has a favorite type of fright. So in this issue you'll find: A bit of summer lingering in Sean Broderick's *Dark Tide Rising*; but don't count on this apocalyptic tale for any warm and fuzzy feelings; the atmosphere in Broderick's yarn is more like the creeping dampness of a graveyard.

Nancy Kilpatrick's skillful blending of reality and fantasy in *Memories of el Día de los Muertos* will usher you into autumn while accounting an age-old festival which centers on death, rather than life.

If Halloween brings to mind childhood fears of demons on the prowl, Steve Rasnic Tem's *The Hunt* will bring such evil chillingly to life for you.

Maybe you like your shivers on the lighter side; if so, you'll enjoy *Double Boogie* by Rick Witherow and *Melancholy of Human Reflection* by Charles Saplak.

James S. Dorr's *Urcheida*, and Richard F. McGonegal's *Tick* each offer a contemporary bit of seasonal terror, while Scott Thomas's *The Wreck at Wickhampton* approaches horror in a classic way. Something for everyone.

The autumnal fictional delights in this issue and the illustrations accompanying them are deliciously chilling. But there's more. . .

Icy fingers of dread will begin to trace their way up your spine when you sample our excerpt from Lois Tilton's vampire novel, *Darkness On The Ice*.

The dead cold of winter and plunging temperatures won't freeze your blood any faster than the tales of Yuletide terror included in our J.N. Williamson special Holiday Supplement.

You're reading these words, so you've already discovered (or are about to discover) what *Dead of Night* has to offer. Spread the word! Tell a friend what you've found here, and mention that they may order a subscription, or that they can look for copies of the magazine in specialty stores or in chain stores like Barnes & Noble. Remember: every order you send our way adds an issue to your own subscription.

We welcome reader feedback, so let us know what you liked best in this issue. We'll pass your comments along to our contributing writers and artists, and perhaps we'll even start a letters to the editor column in a future issue.

But for now, ignore the fading fall sunlight, the lengthening shadows outside your window, and the cold winds of winter which are just around the corner. There's no need to wait any longer for those delicious chills you're craving.

Just turn the page. The shivering begins now. . .

DARKNESS ON THE ICE

(novel excerpt)

Lois Tilton

Lois Tilton is author of **VAMPIRE WINTER**. Her current project: **BETRAYAL**, is set in the universe of **STAR TREK: Deep Space Nine**. (tm) She has published dozens of short stories in various magazines and anthologies, including "The Longest, Darkest Night" (*Midnight Zoo*, Dec., 1991) Also forthcoming is "The Witch's Daughter" (*Ultimate Witch*) as well as work which will be featured in the anthology **CITY OF NIGHT**.

The chase; it had been a tradition for centuries at the castle, in Wolff's time, in Istvan's before him. They would take a serf guilty of some petty crime—or not, but there was hardly a serf who wasn't guilty of some crime or other—and set him loose in the castle courtyard at sunset. If he managed to reach the boundary of the estate by sunrise, he would go free.

Those were the stated conditions, but in fact no serf had ever gone free, not in Wolff's time or in Istvan's. The point of the game had been the chase, to prolong it as long as possible—let the quarry get to within a few yards of the boundary, let him stare in growing hope at the sky starting to grow lighter in the east.

But here in the Arctic there was no sunrise to end the game. The night went on and on without end, with no escape on the broad empty stretch of the ice, nowhere to hide. All they could do was run, and keep running.

Wolff had been easily keeping up with the pace of the dogs. The blizzard had been like a cloak of invisibility at the beginning of the chase. Now, with the clouds blown away from the stars, the Arctic landscape was starkly illuminated and he had to take more

4 Dead of Night

precautions, but this only sharpened the thrill of the hunt.

For much of his existence, he had tried to control the feral side of his nature. He had been brought up to appreciate civilization, the social order—the old order, with all its privilege and, yes, its responsibility. The castle had prospered while he was lord there. But so much of what he valued had been lost. He'd agreed to this mission as a way of trying to regain what he had lost, his castle and lands, if not his title. With the Germans losing the war, it was probably a futile hope. But here on the ice, existence reverted to its essential elements: kill or be killed, survive or die.

It would be good to have Kessler out here on the ice. Alone, without his SS guards behind him. To see how well he would run, how far, how long.

But thinking of Kessler made Wolff recall his purpose in coming to the Arctic. The Americans were not just his personal prey. He had to track them all the way to their base, to leave one of them, at least, alive for that purpose.

It was easy, trailing them. Even when a storm cut down on the visibility, he could follow them by scent. They were afraid. The scent of it was as clear to him as their tracks through the snow. Even the dogs smelled of fear.

The animals could sense what he was, the difference in his scent—not human, not human any more. He was one of them, a predator. But there was only one kind of prey that could satisfy his need. Only one kind of blood.

How many men at the American base? Ten? Twenty? There would be enough—certainly more than enough.

His ears caught the sound of raised voices. The American was quarreling with his guide, accusing him of wasting time trying to catch a seal. Their tempers were very short. It had been a long time since either man had been able to get any real sleep.

The dogs sensed Wolff's presence, hidden behind the rocks at the shore's edge. They whined and pulled at their anchor lines, making the men turn on them with whips, cursing. They were breaking, on the edge of breaking. Wolff licked his lips exposing white teeth.

The guide finally seemed to prevail, taking his gun and walking further out onto the ice where a fissure hinted that there might be a seal's breathing hole. Wolff watched the hunter until he was a dark indistinct shape standing motionless over the hole, waiting for the seal to emerge for air.

Wolff's attention turned to the American, left behind to set up camp. The hungry dogs were fractious, and the man's efforts were hampered by the two quarrelsome teams lunging and snapping at each other. Every minute or so he had to stop and try to warm his hands. As Wolff drew closer, taking advantage of the uneven ridges of shore ice as cover, the animals grew more and more difficult for the soldier to handle. They had Wolff's scent, they knew him, were afraid.

The man was distracted. As he moved down the line of dogs, Wolff caught the eye of the nearest animal, held it--yes. Slowly, the dog lowered its head, whining in submission and fear.

Wolff looked past it to the American, as he kept struggling with the other animals. Wolff's bloodlust had been aroused by the long chase, and now the closeness of his victim was sharpening his need. Political considerations were irrelevant. Enemy or ally, nothing now could stop him from taking this man's blood.

But the soldier was wary. He never took more than a few steps away from the submachine gun slung on one of the uprights of the sled. It was too close, the atmosphere was too clear. He could take him when his back was turned, but not with the dogs to give off the alarm. If he could only quiet all the animals,

now, while the other man was out on the ice, concentrating on the seal.

Suddenly the crack of the rifle broke Wolff's concentration. The American's head jerked up, he ran a few steps out toward the figure on the ice.

Wolff withdrew a short distance, frustrated for the moment. But there would be another opportunity. Like the hunter on the ice, he could wait.

It must be thirty below. At least. Not as much wind, maybe, as the storm a week ago, but the cold was like a knife.

Goddamn dogs!

Ferrier kicked two of them apart, checked the harness on one that had been chewing the leather--the Greenland dogs were the worst, they'd eat their own harness in a minute if you didn't watch them. But none of the animals wanted to be tied up, not with...whatever it was, following them. He didn't blame them. He'd been in bad places before--times when he wasn't sure he was going to make it. But never like this. God, never like this.

He stuck his hands into the relative warmth of his armpits, trying to get them thawed enough that he could tackle the job of putting up the tent. He didn't know how Lars could stand it, out on the ice like that--no shelter, not moving. You couldn't move, he said, not even stamp your feet to keep warm. The seal could hear it. When the sun was up, the seal could see your shadow through the ice.

But it was weeks since they'd seen the sun. It was dark--so dark you couldn't even tell night from day. The inland-dwellers came in the dark.

Lars was a dark shape against the ice, waiting for the seal. Ferrier thought of a seal's open, steaming belly, of plunging his frozen hands into the heat of the guts. The warm, chewy liver. His empty stomach spasmed. He pulled the tent off his sled.

At the sound of the rifle shot, his head jerked up, he stared out to the shadow that was Lars on the ice. The dogs went crazy, howling and pulling on their tethers. They were capable

of bolting down the whole seal--bones, hide and all. Fill their bellies with fresh meat, and they'd pull a lot faster next morning. So maybe Lars was right, it hadn't been a waste of time, after all.

Once the animals were finally fed and the men were inside their sleeping bags, Ferrier closed his eyes, listening for the sound of footsteps outside, someone coming closer to the tent. The dogs, gorged on seal meat, had dug into the snow to sleep, quieter than they'd been in days. If only it was over, if only they were back at the base.

Ferrier opened his eyes and stared at Lar's motionless shape in the fur sleeping bag. *Do you think it's over*, he wanted to ask, *Do you think it's finally gone, whatever's been following us?*

Lars never stirred, but Ferrier could tell from the pattern of his breathing that he was still awake, listening, both of them, listening. *No, it's still out there, somewhere. In the dark. The inland-dweller. Shape-changer. Prowling outside in some terrible form. Blood on its mouth.*

Ferrier had seen wolves in Alaska kill a moose--running the animal to exhaustion, crippling it, then tearing at the belly while the animal was still standing and trembling, tearing it open, snapping at the entrails, pulling them out, eating the animal while it was still alive, still alive...

He sobbed wordlessly, a sharp intake of breath. The wolverine had followed his trapline for two months. All that time, the only thing he'd seen had been its tracks and the other signs it had left--the severed paw of a fox or martin in his traps, the shredded remains of a cache of furs. It had been out there, yes, out there behind him, waiting, silent, unseen, always waiting.

It was the vision he saw now whenever he closed his eyes, because his exhausted imagination insisted on giving the fears a shape--evil black-masked face, a snarl of vicious teeth, wolverine grown huge, as big as a bear, padding silently after him, in his
6 Dead of Night

footsteps. Blood on its mouth--black blood shining in the starlight. A light in its eyes. . .

Ferrier reached for the Thompson, drawing it to him, clutching it against his chest. He could feel Lars, lying next to him in the tent, stiffen inside his sleeping bag. Neither of them had been able to sleep in days, in nights. God, they were going to start hallucinating soon, seeing things, hearing things.

He wondered what Lars was seeing, what crazy vision.

The wind hissed, shards of snow striking the edge of the tent, and he flinched, holding the gun tighter. It could rip open the canvas with its claws, dig them out. . .

He couldn't tell, anymore, whether he was hearing anything or not. The brain plays tricks--you listen hard enough for something and you start to hear. . .things.

It was only when he felt Lars move next to him that he knew the guide had heard it, too. The crushing of ice crystals underfoot. Coming closer. He tried not to breathe. His heartbeat, painfully rapid, was too loud, drowning out the sound. No--there it was again. Yes, it was out there--out there for sure now.

One of the dogs whined, then another. The dogs knew, the dogs were afraid. . .

It was out there. . .coming closer. . .

The explosion of fire ripped through the tent, so loud, so sudden that at first Ferrier didn't realize what he'd done, not until he could hear himself breathing again. And, outside the tent, the sound of dogs howling, whining, yelping in pain.

Lars, sitting bolt upright in panic and shock, stared at him a second, then cursed in his own language and crawled quickly out of the tent to see how much damage Ferrier had done, to tend to the wounded dogs.

Ferrier looked numbly down at the gun in his hand, at the shredded fabric of the tent. *What did I do? How could I shoot. . .*

He was going crazy, that's what it was. A Section-Eight case. Firing through the tent--at what? At nothing! Shooting his own dogs.

The noise from outside had turned to snarls and cries. What was going on? The dogs, especially the Greenland dogs, were capable of

turning on each other. What was Lars doing out there? *I ought to do something.* . .

Ferrier stumbled out into the night and stood still. The moon had risen, almost full, and the white light cast stark black shadows against the snow. Some of the dogs were growling and snapping over a bloody patch in the snow, others were straining on their tethers, wild to get in at the kill. Lars. . . was nowhere. Ferrier tried to call out the guide's name, but his voice was frozen. Suddenly he thought--*the dogs, did the dogs get him?*

Frantic, he tore into the pack of snarling, bloody-muzzled beasts, kicking and using his gun to beat them away, but the carcass they were savaging was one of their own kind.

Lars!" he screamed, then made an choking cry of despair. First Blackburn, now the guide. Disappeared. Swallowed up by the dark. Now he was the only one left.

But the sky was clear this time and the moon lit up the terrain. A little past the margin of the camp he found tracks in the snow, leading inland. The tracks of one man--only one. They were deep, irregular and scuffed, suggesting someone carrying a burden, suggesting a struggle. But no blood. and--they were *human* tracks, the soles of thick soft boots. Ferrier took a breath, a fresh grip on his weapon. Better to face it this way. Whoever--whatever--it was. Better than lying awake in the dark, night after night. Better than waiting.

He started to follow the trail. The enemy (he was starting to think in terms of an enemy again--a human enemy) was moving fast, almost too fast for someone carrying something the weight of a man. But the depth of the tracks argued otherwise.

He could face another man, a German, a Nazi. Who else could it be? Who else but the Germans were on Greenland?

The inland-dwellers, who lived on the icecap? The shape-changers, taking human form?

No, that was crazy. Lars might believe in that native superstition crap, but a white man could not.

The trail led down the shoreline, toward a

tumble of boulders that could easily hide a man--even two men. Ferrier paused and shivered. His breath hung in front of his face, white in the frigid air.

The horizon was open, empty. No way to flank this position. No real use in trying to take cover.

Because there was no other choice, he finally took another step forward, then another, until a sound made him pause again--a faint, muffled moan. Ferrier clutched the Thompson, flexing his fingers again and again so they wouldn't go numb on him. Closer yet, close enough. . .

Then he saw, though it took his mind another split second to register the sight: a figure in white bending over another, mouth pressed to his victim's throat. Bending over Lars. The guide's eyes, staring. Staring open, dead. Then they blinked once. His mouth opened, he tried to say--

Just at that instant the killer looked up. Blood ran from his mouth--blood, black in the moonlight. And his eyes, a lurid glowing red... glowing. . . eyes. . .

Reflexively, Ferrier's hand closed down around the trigger of the submachine gun, and the night erupted with fire. He was still screaming when the gun went silent, empty.

Now there was only Lars, sprawled on the bloody snow. Still. Motionless. Dead.

And no killer. No sign of the killer, anywhere. He was gone, as if he'd evaporated into the air, into the mist.



GRAVE SIGHT

J.N. Williamson

There was a time, several decades ago, when mystery and detective fiction were held in disrepute--by long-forgotten pedants and posuers, I can't resist pointing out--in much the way that horror fiction (and sf and fantasy, to a lesser degree) is held today. At arm's length, where the squishy/squiggly/repellent thing is less likely to get on one's clothes.

Because I first set my sights on writing whodunits and would have rather liked to become the "new" Arthur Conan Doyle, I recall two encouraging facts from my early teens, one that soured quickly and one that did not. The first was learning that President Franklin D. Roosevelt considered himself a Sherlockian and sometimes read other mystery fiction. (It soured because I was an independent kid and I soon came to the realization that I didn't need anybody validating my tastes--and I haven't since then.)

The pleasurable fact that lasted had to do with the way that *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* not only kept finding short stories written by authors of "classics" that were--almost undeniably--'tec or crime stories, but also acquired new stories suitable to elegant *EQMM* created by the major writers of the '40's and '50's. To me, that was (and is) a meaningful validation of that genre's enduring merit. Both the legends of the past and the big money-makers of the present were showing beyond doubt that the fiction originated or successfully advanced by artists such as Poe, Wilkie Collins, and Sir Arthur was wonderful to write and read.

8 Dead of Night

Aside from the fact that most of those tales struck me then as pallid imitations of the "real thing" being written by "Queen," Chandler, John Dickson Carr and others of that time, I'm stuck with wondering where today's genre-crossing giants are--to encourage the acne-faced Jerry Williamsons of the '90's--in the fields of horror, fantasy and science fiction? (And no, I *don't* mean "young adult" novels!)

Honing in on a primary topic of this issue's "GraveSight," is it only that today's politicians couldn't write a decent short story, or even a letter, if their speech writers' lives depended upon it, and that the "mainstream" authors who write what was once called "serious fiction" have absolutely no interest in attempting to write a yarn about vampires or serial killers, conceivable futures, or little furry beings even farther removed from reality than occupants of the White House? (Even publishers, by the way, rarely dare to refer to the ostensible "romance" novels, "legal procedurals" and assorted mildly-kinky clinkers cluttering today's best seller lists as "serious fiction.")

I believe that there are two or more reasons why these (largely) imagination-less successors to Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, Salinger, Michener and the beloved rest almost never "slum" in the genres of record--unless, of course, they (A) get one hellacious offer to do it or (B) are permitted to do it pseudonymously. Here, in part, are the explanations:

1. The writers who aren't crammed in one

category or another are *really* the people writing fantasy fiction--assuming, of course, that present in their books is any fiction beyond the creation of a fictitious name to cover the writer himself, his companion or ex-boss or fictionalized celebrity, etc. (Otherwise, often as not, what readers are stuck with is another endless, tedious character sketch of great seediness or despair in which the only person to experience change at the end of the book is the reader, who has aged.)

2. Many of the mega-successful human page-extenders are in fact so far removed from the "real America" candidate Clinton fancied he had identified that they haven't a ghost of an idea--I *could* stop there, you know--how to write an acceptable story constructed under the fantasy "umbrella."

3. Though there was a time when as many as three-quarters of the professional prose writers (even dramatists) occasionally wrote short fiction, I'm unaware of hardly any contemporary wordwranglers at the economic top who do so with any regularity. (Even in current horror fiction, the household-name people--Koontz, Rice, and lately, Stephen King--and throw in Peter Straub--consistently decline most invitations from editors of both magazines and anthologies.) Part of it, I believe, is an unconscious yearning to be identified primarily as a "best-selling novelist," without any further descriptive labels attached. More, I also believe, is economic reality: It is seldom that *any* short story fetches more than a couple of thousand bucks, and editors of zines and anthos can't compete with novel advances running half a million dollars and (sky-rocketingly) up. (I won't resist the impulse to point out that pros surely have spontaneous ideas that are suitable *only* to short fiction, so it pains me to think of all the wonderful unwritten tales that are presumably being filed away for some vague "future" use or the ideas completely forgotten.)

Each of those reasons I've given for non-genre authors rarely "dabbling" in fantasy, science fiction or horror calls for some exposition:

I said that mainstreamers frequently write the true fantasy fiction. Rather than continuing

to deride them to establish my point--insults are always easy to make--let's take a look at genre fiction and suggest why, as often as not, it's the fiction dealing with reality. In horror, the more frightening aspects of day-to-day existence are regular subject matter these days--even when *elements* of the fiction involve either extremes of behavior (and probability), or the occult. I already paved the way for this point by tying the rise of this fiction to times of national and international peril and, by extension, to the feast all of us experience when governmental measures may filter-down to influence us on an individual, personal basis.

More specifically, this week's *Entertainment Weekly* includes best selling novels revolving around a couple of murder mysteries, a couple of spy-story plots, the Orient, feminism, and so-called high society. One of these--Scott Turow's *PLEADING GUILTY*--is also reviewed in *EW*, and gets a C- even though it stands second on the best selling list! ("Turow is a talented man who desperately needs to be saved from his own misplaced ambitions," Mark Harris writes, adding that the novel "offers a standard version on a story you've read before. . .") Would someone tell me, please, what is either "serious" or "mainstream" about these books--and would anyone like to note that few reviewers are citing *any* of these novels for their remarkable freshness of approach or the originality of their plots? And why should genre writers hand their heads in shame when the novel's No. 2 best-seller gets a C-?

I'm aware that the true critics' darlings don't always make these lists, and that one such writer, Philip Roth, has a new novel in which he meets a man who claims to be--him! At least that sounds fairly original. I shudder to think of what reviewers would say if Koontz, King, or F. Paul Wilson became so self-indulgent--

Or so fantasy-ridden.

Meanwhile, let me just glance at the contents of my fourth *MASQUES* anthology--simply because I know the stories well--and see how much vile, gory, unrealistic and--a critic's pet word--irrelevant fiction we find: Two stories

concern the child abuse of a girl who ultimately learns how to fight back, while a third is a cautionary tale warning against instantly believing every terrifying story children tell. There is a powerful anti-war yarn, a heartbreaking vignette in which a young husband can't live without his bride, another powerful work investigating the strong pull of independent childhood on a beleaguered grown-up, and a tidy look at a woman who can no longer tolerate the din of modern times.

In addition, there are short stories about intrusive houseguests, the effect of love on the "other woman," the way society excludes (and may create its killers), the ultimate greed of rock'n'roll, and a masterfully moral examination of a future not long from now when our faces begin to reveal our sins. And, of course, there's fiction meant for sheer fun and entertainment. Estimated count of *on stage* human blood-letting (not that I give a damn, this is fiction): Fewer than a dozen instances in some two-dozen creations.

Question: How many murderers, spies, high-powered attorneys and millionaire members of the upper-crust do you know? The only Orientals I meet—which may well be my loss—run restaurants. I'm dubious that I know any irresistible ladies men (see how modest I am?) terrorists, amorous southern belles, CIA agents, writers named J.N. Williamson, or decent housewives who are Just Begging For It, yet this sort of stuff appears to be what makes today's lists of brisk-selling novels—along with introspective (and often lewd) first-person narrations of Young Men at Camp, On the Phone, in the Frat House, trying to Make It in New York, and so on.

I'm not saying there's anything wrong with such topics, only that they're generally not original or insightful or imaginative, they're usually not plotted and go almost nowhere, and they're now the real fantasy fiction. From my dictionary, this definition of "fantasy": "An odd or illusory mental image; a whim or caprice." As for "fantastic," this: "Existing in fantasy; unreal; grotesque or odd; capricious; eccentric; unbelievable." Contrast the best sellers'

10 Dead of Night

subjects with those of the tales in *MASQUES IV* by asking yourself whether you hear more on the news about the ultra-rich (and spies) at play, and so forth, or war and deterrents to war; child abuse; grievous loss; alienated pockets of Americans; diseases of the soul; etc.

In short, modern genre fiction, very much including the horrific things that happen to people today, is much more reality-centered and disposed to *say* things about the human condition—and how to heal it—than "serious" fiction.

Another claim of mine was that the literary elite don't know *how* to write the fiction you and I enjoy reading. Part of the reason for their ignorance stems from the entire approach may such writers take to writing. Chances are excellent that they have either begun to write after achieving success doing something entirely different—take the attorneys and physicians who write legal or medical thrillers, for example—or (and this also applies to some of them) they have set out to write by calculatedly planning a literary career. This is not how it used to be done, nor is it true, let me add, of Dr. F. Paul Wilson whose medicine-based mainstreamer (*THE SELECT*) was written after his prior successes both in science-fiction and horror. A slim line stands between writing about what one knows best and what one utilizes, without previously developing the skills of a writer, as a coldblooded springboard to economic achievement.

There is also the fact that sf, horror, and fantasy fiction demand a knowledge of what has preceded one's own story or book in order to understand whether one is playing fair with his or her potential readers. If a writer is going beyond the accepted "formula" of a genre and not providing the ingredients a reader has every right to find, the writer had better know it in order to compensate in some manner. Ignorance of what the regular genre fan expects is what makes the majority of horror, sf and fantasy films stomach-turning exercises in frustration for devoted followers of the given genre. By the same token, managing to write one or two published novels that rip off a giant of literature in the name of "homage" or

"influence" does not qualify that writer to write anything else.

In my early adulthood I went through a phase of doing my level best to turn myself into the "next F. Scott Fitzgerald" till it dawned on me that (1) it was mostly the drama of Scott's life and especially his times that attracted me so powerfully and (2) I didn't do it very well. Thank God I'd also already devoured work by the best authors in horror and science fiction or I might have succeeded in producing a second-rate GREAT GATSBY and, by now, I'd have no writing career left at all!

Do you begin to see that the squishy/squiggly/repellent thing to be held at arm's length is suddenly at the heart of the best-selling, ostensible mainstream books--or when it appears in one of the fantasy fields, it tends to be used symbolically to represent that which is at the heart of all too many human motives and desires? If not, you may be confusing what is written by the most successful of "our" writers with what you, starting out, can sell for a solid advance and encouraging sales. Think it over.

And this leads to the other major topic spotlighted in this second "GraveSight": an explanation for why you may get a lot of "funny looks" when you tell some people you enjoy reading (or creating) the fiction that this column concerns.

To start with, most of the best horror fiction and a considerable quantity of the best sf and fantasy fiction published since the middle to the late '60's has mirrored the most alarming aspects of daily existence. So the people who squirm and make faces when they learn you or I love these categories do so because they're the people who prefer not to think about the risks and grave errors of past, present, future, or alternate worlds, and they certainly don't want to read a yarn that seems to bring the genuine horror nearer. Fleeing these characteristics of human life, they opt for the sort of make-believe that makes us wriggle--or they settle for sitcoms and soaps on the tube.

There was a time when most readers occasionally enjoyed a foray into fantasy, but it was prior to World War II and the Atom Bomb.

I believe both the success the great coverall-umbrella has had and the timorous, shrinking avoidance of fantasy's darker side began about the time the first and eighth letters of the alphabet became acronyms of awe.

I also think a large graph could chart the steady growth of horror and fantasy, and a dip in sf (as many people began to connect the "bad" science inherent in such words as "nuclear" and "radioactive" to science fiction), with surprising precision. The chart would include the Cuban missile crisis of the early '60's when we realized nuclear warheads were centered on us from some 100 miles off Florida; political assassinations and attempts occurring when some people believed the nation would collapse if certain vice-presidents ascended a notch; Viet Nam and the ceaseless gabble about ways to avoid "escalation" (always with the hoodoo-hint of hotheads with eager fingers pressed to red buttons); and the ongoing threat of terrorists (they were, and are, rather like ghosts or demons to us because we can't predict when or where they might "materialize"). Evil was more apparent, and so were THE EXORCIST and ROSEMARY'S BABY.

I seldom make political assessments in my professional work, but now I need to do so: The war in southeast Asia continued after LBJ's disastrous presidency, and Nixon's Watergate exacerbated a wide range of national fears which Ford's and Carter's administrations did little to ameliorate. (Steve King and a few others had kicked off the modern horror era.) The hostage crisis in Iran made many of us feel helpless before a nation with beliefs and goals we could not comprehend, a country that--it seemed unthinkable--detested us and called us evil. (All that is a good definition of what a horror novel's Good Guys often encounter. A great many horror-writing careers--perhaps most of them, mine included--rose from the launching pad, and not a few of these books focused candidly on the theme of good versus evil. That was true of my THE RITUAL (Anti-Christ tale); THE BANISHED (forces of good abducting selected abused minorities to be

saved for a better earth); and BABEL'S CHILDREN (identical twin souls not reborn since Atlantis obliged to thwart an ancient Persian-cum-Iranian devil), and these were three of the 21 novels I published between 1979 and the end of 1984.

Then, while Ronald Reagan certainly had an opposition that first feared he might hurl the world into war--thereby keeping horror fiction successful--he brought a majority of Americans the conviction we were a strong, safe nation. In the process of restoring our confidence and contributing to the downfall of the Soviets, darker fantasy fiction was viewed differently by acquiring editors. For reasons I wish they'd provide us someday, they seemed to believe horror didn't have a worthwhile permanent reading audience and stopped obtaining as much of it.

But while Bush was in office, I obtained my two largest advances--and then he blew it by not capturing *Saddam* (Charles Barkley's spelling) Hussein, and the true recession throughout much of fiction and most forms of fantasy was upon us.

In this space I'm supposed to discuss the state of our fiction; hence, the groundwork I've been laying to this point. I'm hearing rumbles from many quarters in June, while I'm writing "GraveSight," that the dark fantasy decline is almost over. It doesn't seem like that, of course, to writers who haven't sold a novel or acquired a respectable advance for a couple of years. Nonetheless, the bumbling performance of Bill Clinton--look, it's *my* column!--involving his quick-changing promises and general doubt about his wisdom in choice of change and his ability to affect it appears to signify an opportunity for a resurgence on the part of horror/fantasy/sf writers.

As I suggested in the first "GraveSight," horror novels in particular have not, in my opinion, achieved their promise in spite of notable exceptions. Now it seems to me that their writers are on the threshold of fortuitous chances I did not foresee a year or more ago.

It begins by recognizing the limitless possibilities of our ficiton, refusing to look

12 *Dead of Night*

down on it, trying to determine what our readers want--and convincing publishers of it--and realizing we are not writing in a vacuum or void. Ours are the true art forms today, and, as always, what we think and then write will make a difference.

J.N. Williamson has published 49 novels since 1979, and his short fiction has appeared in dozens of publications. Other new stories by Williamson--presumably written before the basketball season begins and he and his wife Mary are engrossed in Indiana University hoops--will be appearing in the magazines *Pulphouse* (a novelette), *Deathrealm*, *The Barrelhouse*, *Bizarre Bazaar '94*, and *Dead of Night*, and in such anthologies as *FRANKENSTEIN*, *DARK SEDUCTIONS*, *VOICES IN THE NIGHT*, and *VAMPIRE DETECTIVES*.



KL BOSTON/ANDRO

MEMORIES OF EL DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

Nancy Kilpatrick

Nancy Kilpatrick's short fiction has appeared in over 50 anthologies and small press publications, including: *Year's Best Horror*; *Freak Show*; *Deathport*; *Bizarre Bazaar '93*; *Rituals and Northern Frights*. A trilogy of her vampire stories, (*Sex and the Single Vampire*) will be published in the summer of '94 by Tal Publications. Her vampire novel *Near Death* will be published by Pocket Books in 1994. Nancy was a finalist this year for the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award.

You call me death bringer, as though ancient words can wound me. When I was mortal, as you are still, that name filled me with loathing. Now, because I live forever, because I have seen your grandparents rot and will watch *Los Gusanos* devour your children, your words fade like the ghosts of memories.

This eve of the Day of the Dead—my day, although you do not yet realize there are many ways to be dead—I watch you enter the cemetery just after sunset. The crude wooden crosses as well as those of fine marble are draped with fragrant bougainvillea and gardenia and you add your flowers to the stones you stop beside. I see your wife spread a colorful blanket over the graves of your ancestors and open jars and boxes for the long night of sharing. A night when the dead will consume the spirit of the food you offer. Food you expect to devour.

Your son and two daughters pulse with life. Life I no longer possess. They skip along the dusty paths eating sugar skulls and clutching papier-mache skeletons until the sky blackens and the few fires scattered throughout the graveyard become the only light under a

moonless sky. The children fall silent and huddle near you, fearful, expectant. You tell them a story. Of how the dead, on this Day, return to converse with the living. To fulfill promises and offer guidance. To bring good fortune. As you play your guitar and sing a song, your eyes are sad and fearful. Years have passed since you have visited the dead. Few still come here to spend the night.

By the flickering embers you stare at the worn oval photograph of your mother and imagine her returning. You want this yet fear it. To speak with her again, to feel her bless you and the ones you love... Your son and daughters have fallen asleep. Your wife is drowsy. She leans back and closes her eyes, her long black hair and the crucifix she wears falling away from her throat. You are alone.

Outside the cemetery walls the mariachi band has stopped playing. A cool wind caresses you, blowing hair up the back of your head, exposing your neck. You shiver. I laugh, and you turn abruptly at the sound. Familiar. Alien. Darkness presses in on you and the dead beneath you struggle to call a warning, but their voices were silenced long ago by the worms. You look again to the picture of your mother, then to the sky, and cross yourself, sensing she can no longer help you.

Something flies through the night air, beyond the illumination of the fire. A bat, you hope. Wings flap and you listen as though to a voice. The tequila bottle is less than half full; you take another swallow and I can see you are wondering how you will endure this night.

Once, long ago, when your ancestors and I walked in daylight together, I sat where you sit



now. Honoring the dead. Singing sad and joyous songs to them. Telling their tales of grief and bitterness and of how they loved. Of how they lived, and died. Memories stir in me like petals rustled by a breeze.

At last you see me, a shadow among shadows. The guitar slips from your hands. I have come for you. Your eyes are red-rimmed with the knowledge. You plead. Your wife, you say, and your children. There are things you have not yet done. You beg me to spare you until morning, imagining I do not know my powers will wane with the sun. I laugh as tears spill down your weathered face. I am incapable of pity. When I reach out to stroke your cheek, to feel the warmth pushing against your flesh, salty wetness coats my dead fingers. Astonished, I remember.

On a Day of the Dead such as this, when I sat where you sit now, my loved ones beside me, music floating on the cool breezes drifting down from the mountains, I, too, wept. My vulnerable tears betrayed me then, as yours betray you now. My tears did not save me.

What warms your body will soon warm mine. I nod at the boy child, the youngest. A substitute. You decline, as I knew you must. I do not see this as heroism or bravery, simply what you would do.

You turn to the picture of your mother. She will intercede, you think. You pray to her. To anyone. A small iguana springs onto the tombstone next to the melting candle you have placed there. He pauses to stare at you; he is a sign, you believe, good or ill, how can you be certain? I step into the firelight. Neither the dead nor the living can help you now.

"Why?" you ask me. This question I have heard many times over the years. Many times. It is a question for which there is no answer. Your life does not mean to me what it means to you. I feel no love or sympathy, no pity; I no longer understand remorse. All I can tell you is that I long for your hot blood to swirl through my cold body. Your eyes are the only reflection I am capable of seeing and in them I find myself as I once was but am no longer. This image cannot sway me. What I need I must have.

You suddenly understand a horror that all your life you had avoided. You find this incomprehensible: dead exist to whom you mean nothing. And yet even you must know that blood is all that matters on this day when LOS MUERTOS are honored.

Across the graveyard another calls his ghosts and I listen, intrigued by the bitter-sweet song. The night is long; there are many here with offerings. Many. To one such as myself, all are equal.

Before I turn away, I glimpse disbelief in your eyes. Gratitude. You cross yourself and fall on your knees before your mother. Before me.

I drift between the worn stones toward new warmth. You are a memory already fading. A memory that will die. A memory of the dead.



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BOOK REVIEWS

BY

NEAL HAWES



FACADE by Kristine Kathryn Rusch *Abyss*
(Dell Horror); March 1993; pbk. \$4.99

Murders, an actor, repression, and a haunted beach. Famed television actor Thomas Stanton, while filming for his detective series in beautiful Depot Bay, Oregon buys a house nearby. The perfect house, near the beach and cheap. Cheap because a woman had been murdered there three years earlier, and the killer had never been caught.

Three days after moving in, Heather, Tom's thirteen year old daughter, appears on his front porch. She disappears from the house that night, and Thomas witnessed a cloaked figure running down the beach. It is two years before they found her skeleton in a nearby sea cave.

Shortly after that heartbreaking discovery, while filming above a rugged cliff overlooking the beach at Depot Bay, Tom takes a tumble down the jagged rocks to the sand below. He's in the hospital long enough to gain thirty pounds, and that doesn't include the cast that covers his entire left leg.

The fall changed Thomas. Physically, he is an older, frailer version of that dashing television actor; but mentally, he is alert and focused. Now that the uncertainty is finally over, he is going to learn who killed his Heather.

As a first step, he moves back into the beach house, which has sat empty since the night of Heather's disappearance. Tom firmly believes that the murder that occurred in his house and his daughter's death are connected. He meets Jillian, the lady editor of the local *16 Dead of Night*

paper, and smelling a story, she agrees to help him. She uncovers a pattern of murders that are very similar, and occur on the stretch of beach that runs by Tom's house. She also learns that Thomas had been filming nearby, wearing a cape, at the time of a previous murder. They keep looking, trying to fit facts, motives, and patterns together into logical theories.

As these theories appear, the fog that hides Tom's repressed memories begins to thin. Details of his past become visible, both to him and the reader, and combined with the information that Jillian is gathering, another victim becomes apparent.

The author provides us with lots of theories and red herrings to choose from; the Serial Killer Theory, the Haunted Beach Theory, the Religious Cult Theory, and the theory that Thomas is the killer. The only one that the author doesn't suggest is a logical progression from the others; that Serial Killer Tom is a member of a Religious Cult that worships the Haunted Beach by offering up female sacrifices.

Interestingly enough, I've just completed a months vacation near Depot Bay, so as well as enjoying Ms. Rusch's story line, I had the added fun of comparing her backgrounds with reality. She has done an excellent job infusing her novel with the essence of the area, but as it is my favorite section of the Oregon coast, I might be a little prejudiced. She captures the constant impact of the ocean, whose presence seems to magnify the day; a bright sunny one almost forces everyone to smile because of the sheer physical overwhelming joy of a beautiful day at the beach; a gray, rainy one provides a brooding presence that seems to impact on the

spirit; and night, well the dark is when all the ocean monsters that we know don't really exist, come out. Being familiar with the area made reading this book even more fun. I could visualize the background settings in far greater detail than any author could hope to provide. I've been in some of the restaurants and shops, walked the streets and beaches, driven the roads, and talked to the locals.

Reading **FACADE** took me back on vacation, and gave me a murder mystery to solve. What more could a reader ask for?

THE MAKING OF A MONSTER by Gail Petersen; Abyss (Dell Horror); June 1993, pbk. \$4.99

It takes place in California. Kate has played the good-little-wife role, reluctantly leaving behind her family and friends to follow her husband across the country to Los Angeles, because he has a job there. Unhappy, depressed and lonely, Kate floats from job to job, searching for something. Things don't go well at home, with neither Kate or her husband recognizing that there is a problem. Against her husband's wishes, Kate enrolls in an acting class. (So much for the set-up; here we go!)

At class, Kate meets the obligatory (for a vampire story) mysterious stranger, and she immediately falls-in-love (don't they all?). Kate and Justin do a mating dance of coffee, drinks, and conversation. They develop a deep, meaningful, burning affection for each other, which they consummate one night. Her expression of love is through the sharing of herself. His is the bestowing of the gift of immortality; only he didn't ask permission first. For Kate, it was the gift from Hell; she didn't want it, couldn't refuse it, it was the wrong size, and it couldn't be exchanged.

Kate is not happy, partially about being changed into a vampire. (I mean, that is the last thing that you are looking for when you enter into an extramarital affair); and partially because Justin took away her power of choice. Kate had just started making decisions for herself, in spite of what her husband wanted; and by irrevocably changing her, Justin was

forcing her back into the "poor little female who needs a big strong man for protection" role that she had just escaped. Kate is NOT happy.

She dumps his ass, and instead of running back to her husband (as I expected), she takes off on her own. This voyage of self-discovery is what the book is all about. Kate recovers the emotional ground that Justin had taken from her, but this time, instead of turning to acting as an outlet, Kate decided that rock-n-roll will soothe her soul.

Put simply, this is a 90's update of the basic "boy meets girl" plot. The girl is already married, and the boy is a vampire, but I said that this was a 90's version!

THE MAKING OF A MONSTER, like Bram Stoker's **DRACULA**, reflects the woman's role in society at the time it was written. (Hey! They're both vampire books, so that is a fair comparison!) **DRACULA'S** 1890's woman relied on men for support and protection; as the "weaker sex," their life revolved around home and hearth, while the man earned the living and protected "his" woman. (The term "property" comes to mind). **MAKING'S** 1990's woman, tries on the traditional female role (*Some people like it*), and is in the process of growing out of it when she is changed into a vampire. Utilizing her vampire powers, she is able to successfully compete with men in her chosen field, which just happens to be rock-n-roll.

Empowered by equal opportunity employment and automatic weapons, the 1990's woman is more than capable of providing for and protecting herself. What she wants now is equality, both at home and in the workplace. This is change. Men don't like change. Change implies that something the Man did was wrong. Men don't like to be wrong (hell, we still refuse to stop and ask for directions when we're lost!). Some men are not secure enough in their masculinity to abdicate the stereotype associated with protector and breadwinner. They need this role model to dictate their place in society. If they were just smart enough to listen to women, they'd be told their place! Fortunately, this numb-skulled example of the

masculine gender is dying out (one passed away just last week!), leaving the kinder, gentler, unthreatened-by-a-strong-woman 90's kind of guy in charge. Now, if you can just find us! (And don't ask me for directions, I'm already lost!)

PENANCE by Rick R. Reed; Abyss (Dell Horror); January 1993, pbk. \$4.99

A novel straight out of today's headlines, and all the more terrifying because of it.

Dwight Morris has a mission; to redeem the young street prostitutes that have so often lead him astray. In spite of the fact that they have ruined his life, he holds no animosity. Dwight is interested only in the salvation of these lost youths; for when their souls are cleansed of wickedness, then they will be able to walk down the path of righteousness. Dwight's aunt taught him that the quickest way to the path of righteousness is through pain.

Self-sacrificing Dwight is willing to risk his own salvation to help these poor children to see the light. His motives are pure, and to demonstrate that he has only their own best interests at heart, he prays for their immortal soul as he rapes them; especially the young, male prostitutes. (Can we say pedophile?)

Over the years, the raping and torturings don't seem to do much good. Dwight tries his best, but there are still lots of adolescent and pre-adolescent boys and girls, selling themselves, tempting good men like Dwight away from God's salvation. Then the bottom falls out of Dwight's world. His aunt Adele, beloved substitute parent who taught him everything she knew about God and pain, dies.

Two weeks after her death; an ungrateful little piece of street trash names Jimmy, who Dwight had kidnapped and introduced to the cleansing pain of anal rape, sets fire to the clothes that Dwight is wearing, and escapes. Dwight's wife sees the boy, recognized the clues, packs up their daughter and leaves him.

Dwight realizes three things; that he has to recapture Jimmy, that fire is the ultimate purifier, and that dead Aunt Adele is talking to him. (Then things get crazy).

18 Dead of Night

To restate my first paragraph, this book is so damn scary because it's so damn real. The author has basically taken true cases, changed the names (to protect the innocent), and woven them together into a compelling, engrossing statement about today's society. I don't mean specific true cases, I mean that the author has done his homework so well that the fiction that he writes parallels reality so closely that it is reality. Confused? How about this; the people are fiction, the acts, deeds and circumstances are not. They happen all the time. Truth really is stranger than fiction.

The author has hit character motivation right on the head. Dwight is driven to what he does by several things:

1. He was taught sexual torturing by *being* sexually tortured by his aunt.
2. He verbally denied his attraction to males because his aunt taught him to deny any desires that were "evil," but he consistently chooses to sexually assault the boys (some people would say that he developed his bisexual urges as an act of defiance to his aunt's abuse; others might say that people are either born with these urges or not).
3. He integrated the feelings of worthlessness that his aunt inflicted on him. That became readily apparent when Dwight began "hearing" her dead voice. Dwight shares this same poor self image with the street children. Children believe the labels given to them by caretakers (usually parents and/or authority figures), and the children live up (or down) to these labels. Be critical with your kids and they will feel inadequate, which leads to more criticism and more feelings of inadequacy. Withhold love or approval or attention from kids, and they will seek out someone who will give it to them; be it peers, a teacher, a family friend, or a stranger with \$10. When children get desperate enough, *any* attention is better than no attention.
4. He actually believed that he was helping the children by hurting them. Why? His aunt said she was helping him as she hurt him. Children are innocent and trusting, and if someone they love (who is supposed to love them,) hurts them "for their own good," then



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full-throttle to make
to check it out, so
it'll be a big one.
Junk, gross, junk,
junk, biggie fella,
universal dog food
of farts, so we put
our good looks on
the line to no avail
and are half by
alone farm.
We're holding the
big boys over, so be
sure to buy your
grandmother a
capp. And remem-
ber: Keep your
socks off that head.
It's mine!

they learn that love and pain go together.
Dwight learned that it was okay to hurt
someone to help them overcome their
wickedness. He prayed for salvation as he
raped the boys for their own good.

Dwight was a victim, just as much as the
children were; but not an innocent victim.
Nobody in the book was innocent.

Neal Hawes was extremely disappointed
when he didn't win that \$111 million lottery
drawing. He had so many plans! He and his
lovely wife Laurie would quit their jobs of
18+ years working with juvenile delinquent
males, buy a motor home, set up college
funds for friends and family kids, and invest
in their favorite magazine. Their 9 year old
daughter, Melinda, would be forced to travel
with them...anyone for Disneyland?
Unfortunately, this was not meant to be
(Yet!), so Neal returned from Vacation to his
normal existence of working too much, not
writing enough, and continuing his lifelong
unofficial survey of micro beer, pizza, and
bookstores of the Pacific Northwest. He is
considering expanding this research to
include fudge.



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THE HUNT

Steve Rasnic Tem

Steve Rasnic Tem has sold over 200 short stories to date to such publications as *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine*, *The Saint Magazine*, *Twilight Zone Magazine*, and *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*. He has a Masters in Creative Writing from Colorado State University, where he studied poetry under Bill Tremblay and fiction under Warren Fine.

He's been nominated for the Bram Stoker Award, The British Fantasy Award, and the World Fantasy Award for Short Fiction in 1988. A novel, *EXCAVATION*, appeared from Avon Books in 1987.

Tem has also had a number of chapbooks published, and a collection of his short stories will also be appearing soon from the French publisher Denoel.

Each night, after long hours alone in his apartment, he dreamed of hunting.

Each night became again his first night on the hunt, when the intoxication with the find, the chase, and the final kill was at its headiest. Each night his sense of the poetry of hunting was renewed: track and spoor and scent and trap, pursue, close, kill. Each night he blooded himself with his first kill, painted his forehead and cheeks like a woman, tasted the salty warmth of the creature's dying innocence as he made it his lover.

In the hunt the relationship between hunter and prey was charged and intimate. He had discovered again and again that this was true. There was sorrow at the end for having killed the prey, sometimes it was as if the hunter had
20 Dead of Night

wounded himself instead. Hunter and prey acted out a kind of cosmic play. The hunt was a dance, a lovemaking, an orchestrated accident, a trip through a fairytale. At its best, the wound the hunter made was a kiss.

Sometimes the hunter had to move to new grounds, for different prey, for safety. He had moved twenty or more times in the past year and a half. Such mobility had its drawbacks: he had no friends, and certainly no wife or girlfriend, or chance for children of his own. Jobs were always of the worse kind, far beneath him. But as the ordinary aspects of his life grew narrower, the hunt rapidly expanded to fill the empty space. The hunt had brought drama and color into his life.

The hunt had brought him hundreds of other people's children.

Some people believed that children were miniature adults, he knew, miniature versions of themselves. Prettier, idealized versions of adults, their skin soft and unmarred by age or disease, their hair soft and smelling of soap, their lips berry-colored, unbelievably pliant, their eyes large and liquid.

It was sad when adults with children did not understand what their children really were. Obviously, they didn't understand their children at all. Their ignorance was apt to get their sweet children maimed or killed.

He, on the other hand, understood children. He knew them intimately. He had known hundreds of children over the span of his colorful career, and not one of them had been anything like an adult.

Children were like aliens, or strange animals. Some were like deer, or ferrets, or

small squirrels. . They lived among the adults, depended on the adults, but still they had their own rules. They did not think or feel like adults--they dreamed differently, conceptualized differently, even felt pain differently. He knew all of these things from long experience. And the children understood this as well, at some primitive level. you could tell by their half-smiles, the way they looked up at you with mocking, human-like faces.

Now he was in another new neighborhood, far away from any previous hunting ground. he'd had to leave the last, once fruitful site: a playground near some projects, in another city, because of some largely accidental media attention. He missed all their dark, expectant faces when he reached into his hunter's bag. There had been his first and last attempts at trophies. He had never been able to preserve their natural beauty; instead his trophy attempts had highlighted deterioration and corruption, and the ephemeral quality of youth.

This new neighborhood might best be described as upper middle class. It reeked of money, poorly spent on tacky cars, houses, and furnishings. It had the complacency of the rich without the security necessary to justify it. And worse, it lacked the well-developed imagination of the poor for disaster. He always had especially enjoyed stalking such neighborhoods.

He'd been watching the James girl for a week. He knew her last name from the sign on the mailbox; he had no interest in a first name. he followed the trail she made through the neighborhood: abandoned games with other children, flowers smelled, cats stroked, toys put down and forgotten. Sometimes he got close enough to smell her.

She had large brown eyes and the full lips which were preferable in a specimen of her type. She had long, mock-adult hair. He was awed by her, the graceful way she moved for a creature so young. He was careful not to venture too close, even though, more than anything, he wanted to pull her closer, stick out his tongue, taste her. But she was a beautiful animal he did not want to frighten away.

He was always quite careful; everything had to be planned out to the last second. Something

could always go wrong. None of them were as easy as they seemed. A five-year-old is not a particularly predictable creature.

On Sundays the James girl left her family's neat green house on Reynolds Street and walked the six blocks to a small out-of-the-way church atop Grove Hill. The congregation there seemed to be small; he'd seen a dozen or so. The rest of the James family apparently stayed at home. He rarely saw any of them leaving or entering the house--the father about twice a week for a few hours, and the mother usually once a day, puttering around in the flower garden. The little girl seemed to be the only one in the family taking normal excursions outside the home.

When she left the house at nine o'clock on Sunday morning he was waiting for her, a block and a half behind. He followed her in his car.

She moved like a small deer. A red ribbon in her hair, a bright yellow dress, patent leather shoes. gorgeous. He held back, not wanting to spook her.

He flexed his fingers, rubbed his hands, the anxiety prickling his palms. It had been almost two weeks since the Mason girl in Carterton. A month before that a nameless little farm girl in Bingham. He'd slept in his car outside the town for a week now, just waiting for this opportunity.

He felt sorrow as the end of the hunt approached. He imagined he could see the pulse in her throat, smell the blood rushing to feed her primitive consciousness.

She was skipping now, and had just turned off onto Smith street. She began the steady climb to the top of Grove Hill. She seemed to be singing to herself, but she was so far away, he wasn't positive.

Small prey were the best; they appeared to be innocent, and trusting. Although perhaps no animal could be said to be truly innocent.

The James girl stopped to play with the other animals among the oaks. She laughed out loud, squealed with delight.

But most of all he liked the smaller prey because they seemed *intended* for examination.

As if they had been bred for that purpose. Almost like laboratory specimens.

She looked up in alarm when he pulled his car up beside her.

They were meant to be handled; they fit his large hands so perfectly. They would be human, someday, at which time he would leave them alone. But in this early larva stage they were not human, however much they might pretend.

"That's a steep climb for such a little girl. Why don't you let me take you to church today?"

"I don't know you," she said quietly, her doe eyes on his face.

"Why, I'm an old friend of your father's. I was going to visit him now, when I saw you climbing the hill."

The girl looked doubtful, but climbed in obediently when he opened the door for her. He didn't even have to talk her into it. What kind of parents were these, to have children who would take such risks? She was like the squirrels in a park, the fear of the hunter conditioned out of them.

She gave off a heady, animal smell. He wanted to bury his face in the warm musk of her.

It took only a few minutes to make a wrong turn and drive outside the town limits. It was a small town. He really liked small towns.

"This isn't the right way, mister."

"I thought I'd talk to you a little about your dad before I dropped you off."

It seemed to him her eyes were quite wide now. Her nostrils flared as if smelling the danger. He enjoyed that.

To his amazement she began edging closer to him even as he began reaching for her. Her lips were quivering.

He especially enjoyed those first few minutes when they became frightened, terrified of him. Their mouths opening to scream, their small faces turning red as they began crying. He immediately wanted to start beating them in the face, to make them cry more. It fascinated him--to be able to make something cry like that.

He began prodding her little chest with his thick fingertips, searching for an opening. He was considering whether to tear her dress off

22 Dead of Night

her, or to remove it from the back, gently.

Her small lips started pulling back off her teeth.

He was thinking about probing her ears, her belly, her throat, her narrow armpits with his blunt fingers, such small hollows that if he pushed hard enough he knew he could feel her internal organs, her frightened little trapped animal heart beating against his fingertip before he crushed it, when he discovered the sudden sharpness in her hot, wet mouth.

He was thinking about the church with the small congregation, her parents looked up in their home every day, when she leaned her small head into his stomach, her exquisite little arms hugging him tightly.

Her teeth were small, but they were very sharp.

* * * * *



TICK

Richard F. McGonegal

Richard F. McGonegal is managing editor for a daily newspaper. His fiction has been published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Thin Ice*, *Plots*, *Midnight Zoo*, *Doppelganger*, *Not One of Us*, and previously in *Dead of Night*.

Tick, tick, tick, buzzzzzz. The din reverberated in Mallick's skull and snapped him into consciousness.

He lifted his head off the wristwatch, pressed the tiny button to silence the alarm, and rubbed his ear--a futile attempt to massage away the pain. In the darkness of the decrepit one-room cabin, he squinted at the lighted dial on the timepiece: 4:32 a.m.

Mallick unzipped himself from the mummy-like confines of the down-filled sleeping bag. The crisp, autumnal air permeating the imperfect enclosure--stripped of its windows and door--assaulted his warm skin. The chill sent a convulsive shiver through his body, then subsided into a tingling sensation. He pressed a palm against his forehead; his brow felt cool and moist, like a retriever's nose.

Propping himself on his elbows, he gazed through the open doorframe. The trees beyond were bathed in the pale glow of moonlight--their limbs electric, their leaves damp and radiant.

Mallick switched on the flashlight he had left laying on the floor beside him, then reached into a pocket of his backpack and removed a clean pair of jockey shorts. He slipped off the pair he had slept in and felt--something. The sensation was painful, an acute stinging.

He sat upright and directed the flashlight

beam at his groin. A patch of redness flared from his inner thigh to the base of his testicles. He brushed his genitals gently to one side with a cupped hand and located the cause of the inflammation. A tick--a common wood tick--had lodged itself in the tender angle of his crotch.

"Shit," Mallick muttered. He examined the parasite. It had, indeed, bored its head into the flesh, its distended body already fattening itself on his blood.

Mallick pinched the tiny body between his thumb and forefinger, then tugged. The stinging intensified; the mite failed to yield its hold. Mallick released the tick and considered the possible cures and consequences.

Simply yanking at the tick with renewed force, he knew, would be inadvisable. If he decapitated the parasite and the head remained burrowed in his skin, which now seemed likely, it would be difficult to remove and might cause infection.

Heat--a lighted match blown out and quickly touched to the tick--would bring withdrawal, he recalled. Although he carried a disposable lighter in his jacket pocket and a spare in his pack, he had no matches.

Mallick assessed his options. Aware that the parasite could transmit disease and fever--particularly the dreaded Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever--Mallick knew the wisest course would be to leave the woods, consult a physician and have the tick removed properly.

Pursuing that course, however, would mean missing the opening of bowhunting season and the anticipated shot at the trophy he had been scouting--a majestic eight-point buck.



The area he had selected as his hunting ground was reasonably secluded, but not so secluded that other hunters might not come stumbling through and claim the deer in his absence. He had invested the past five weekends in anticipation of this morning, including six days of searching, watching and waiting in the woods, two Friday nights camped in this run-down, long-abandoned cabin, two days building his tree-stand, and countless hours sharpening both his skills as an archer and his deadly broadhead arrows.

Mallick wasted little time in contemplation. He was not about to be driven from the woods and denied his prize because of a garden-variety bug which was no larger than a nailhead. He decided to leave the parasite unmolested, hunt until late morning, hike the three-mile trek to his pick-up truck, then seek professional removal of the tick.

Mallick went to the open doorframe and urinated before carefully pulling on his long underwear and his camouflage pants. He emptied a thermos of coffee into a pan, reheated it on a small camp stove, and drank two cups with a breakfast of biscuits and canned peaches.

By 5:15 a.m., he had repacked his gear, donned sweatshirt, camouflage jacket and hat, and outfitted himself. He had strapped a hunting knife onto his belt, stuffed an orange into each of his two large jacket pockets, and strung his compound bow, which featured a mounted quiver boasting six broadhead arrows. Mallick left the backpack leaning against the inside wall of the cabin, knowing

he would pass the structure on his return route. As planned, Mallick was ahead of the dawn.

He walked quickly, but quietly, along the trail which led to the tree-stand. When he arrived, he stood silently for a moment at the tree's base and surveyed the intertwining silhouettes of branch and brush, listened to the sounds of the awakening woods, inhaled the cool, invigorating air. Mallick smiled, filled with pleasure and anticipation.

He climbed the first rung he had nailed onto the tree and a sharp, shooting pain from his groin immediately rekindled his awareness of the parasitic baggage he had forgotten temporarily. He continued his ascent slowly and delicately, wincing slightly at each step upward.

The platform seemed an oasis. He stood, hung his bow on a convenient branch, and leaned his back against the trunk of the tree. The climb had reawakened his appetite, which manifested itself as a deep grumbling in the hollow of his stomach. He retrieved an orange from his pocket, peeled it with his hunting knife, then plunged the blade securely into the tree trunk.

Mallick expected each wedge of orange--with its succulent juice, its natural sugar--to renew his strength; instead, it seemed to drain him. He felt lightheaded, about to swoon. The ground below appeared to careen toward him, then recede. Cautiously, Mallick lowered himself into a sitting position, sliding his back along the tree trunk for stability. He lowered his head between his knees and saw the bulge beneath his pants.

Mallick gently pressed his fingertips against the lump in the crease of his groin; its firmness

yielded a sickening sensaion. He leaned sideways, gagged, but failed to vomit.

He closed his eyes and fanned himself with his hands. Gradually, both the warmth and swooning sensation abated. Confident of his composure, he stood, unfastened the camouflage pants and pulled both pants and long underwear to his knees.

The sight of the tick-- which had swelled to golf-ball sized proportions-- brought a sudden, violent reprise of nausea. Mallick felt the bile rise in his throat, its acrid, repulsive taste nearly choking him. Then. . . a sound, so distinctive Mallick knew its origin before he turned and confirmed it.

The presence of the buck-- which meandered along a trail not more than thirty yards from Mallick's perch-- unleashed a wild rush of adrenalin. Mallick sturggled to contain the energy which coursed through his veins, limbs and flesh, fought to channel the newfound alertness into controlled action.

Focusing his gaze on the magnificent animal, Mallick searched in the periphery of his vision, located the bow and reached for it slowly. The deer halted in mid-stop, one forefoot still raised; Mallick stopped in mid-reach. The buck looked left, right, forward, but not upward. It twitched its ears.

Mallick waited, wondering if the animal had caught a trace of his scent. The stand-off seemed interminable. Mallick felt flushed, his arm ached.

Finally, the buck planted its forefoot and, apparently satisfied no danger was imminent, continued its slow meandering.

Mallick grasped the bow, quietly nocked an arrow and drew the bowstring to his chin. Mentally, he measured the distance and fixed his aim, quietly cursing the branch between the arrow and target. Holding the bow at full draw, he waited for the buck to take the few steps forward into an unobstructed, deadly line of sight.

Again the animal raised its head, looked around, flicked its tail. "Move," Mallick whispered. Mallick's shoulder quivered; the animal remained motionless, alarmed. Mallick's arm shook wildly, the arrow rattling

against the bow. The buck bolted.

Mallick released the bowstring and the arrow smacked erratically, but harmless, amidst branches.

"Godammit," Mallick shouted. He leaped forward instinctively to witness the animal's flight and, as if tackled by the pants constricting his knees, toppled forward. He flailed his arms to regain his equilibrium, but his efforts proved futile.

The sensation of falling was unlike either his expectations or his dreams. His descent was not a clean, crisp plummet of rapid motion; instead, he careened and crashed through branches, brushing some aside, breaking others-- all in seeming slow-motion. He recalled the story of a bowhunter who had fallen from a tree-stand, impaled himself on one of his own broadhead arrows and bled to death, and Mallick-- with a presence of mind which surprised him-- flung his bow aside. Finally, he somersaulted through the remaining branches, caught a momentary glimpse of the ground and continued spinning.

His plunge ended with a muted, almost soggy thud. The pain rent his body with a sudden, explosive shock and the air and screams gushed simultaneously from his lungs.

The screaming stopped long before the pain. Lying motionless on his back, his head pillowed in a crook of exposed tree roots, Mallick peered up at the branches which had failed to cradle him in gentle descent.

He twitched a shoulder-- the violent onslaught of pain assured him he was badly injured. His back or collarbone, he suspected, was broken. The pain was excruciating, the damage severe, but a least, Mallick thought, he was alive.

How long, he wondered, before someone would find him? Any hunters nearby would have heard the crash and would respond in moments. Barring such good fortune, he might wait days.

Mallick looked at the bundle of pants and long johns encircling his knees, and felt suddenly embarrassed that someone would find him so unceremoniously attired. The sight, as well as his reaction, struck him as both

ludicrous and ironic, but hardly humorous. Keeping his head motionless, he lowered his gaze slightly and noticed-- peeking from his groin-- a tan semi-circle with an arc about the size of a softball.

The tick, Mallick thought. He shuddered involuntarily, unleashing yet another wave of pain. A cold, tingling sensation effused his forehead and crept through his limbs; he recognized the symptoms-- shock. "Hang on," he muttered aloud. "Hang on."

Mallick tried to focus on remaining calm and still, but his mind rebelled. His thoughts, almost maliciously, gravitated toward the tick. Images swam feverishly in his brain, collided, bonded and created a momomaniacal desire to destroy the parasite. Mallick wanted it out-- whether by pulling, prying or cutting-- he resolved to succeed.

He plotted its removal with singular preoccupation. He couldn't pull on it; the effort would yield unbearable pain. But perhaps he could-- with slow, measured motion-- slice it out.

Mallick flexed his fingers-- no pain. He considered the distance from hand to knife, his plot shattered by the crushing realization that his knife remained imbedded in the tree trunk some twenty-five feet above him. His despair, however, was quickly dispelled by the onrush of an alternative-- the razor-sharp broadheads. He had tossed the bow and quiver aside during his fall, but-- amidst all the branches-- he suspected he could not have flung it far. it must be nearby, unless, his roller-coaster of thoughts cautioned him, it had become lodged in a branch.

He scanned the limbs overhead; the bow was not visible. Again he flexed his fingers, encouraged by the ease of movement. He snaked his arm slowly along the ground and a sharp pain coursed up his spine and radiated down his arm. "Dammit," Mallick shouted, the force of his voice generating another chastising burst of pain.

Defeated, Mallick relaxed his arm. His wrist rolled limply and he felt something-- something slender and taut, like a bowstring--

26 Dead of Night

resting against the back of his hand. He wiggled his fingers, drumming the backs of them against the waxy string. Encouraged, he drew his arm slightly toward him, opened his palm and cautiously curled his fingers. The bowstring reverberated with a twang as it snapped from his fingernails. He heard the bow slide on the leaves, along the contour of the ground-- downward and further from his grasp.

Mallick laid motionless, his eyes darting furtively, as if watching his final option flee. He braced himself, then lifted and flung his outstretched arm in a wild, defiant grab. Pain seized him with violent vengeance, roaring simultaneously through every sinew, tendon and cartilage in his body. He shivered, screamed, quaked and, finally-- mercifully-- passed out.

He opened his eyes slowly, squinting against the piercing rays of sunset. Despite the encroaching cold of evening, Mallick felt suffused with heat; despite his stillness, his head seemed to sway dizzily; despite having awakened from nearly twelve hours of unconsciousness, he was weak and weary.

He gazed indolently at nature's palette--blue sky, white clouds, green pines, red and yellow and brown oak leaves. His eyes widened as he spotted the tan object. The tick's swollen, distended body laid like a large, water-filled balloon on his thigh.

Mallick fought the urge to vomit-- a battle he knew he was destined to lose. He heaved up partially digested bits of oranges and bisquits and peaches, but mostly he heaved up pain.

Six men stared at the lifeless body. The group included the hunter who had stumbled upon the corpse, the sheriff who had been contacted, and the entourage the sheriff had enlisted: a deputy, two paramedics, and the coroner.

Although the coroner made the official pronouncement, any of the six could have reached the same conclusion: dead.

The cause of death was less obvious, even to the coroner. He was asked by the assembly, but refused to hazard a guess prior to an autopsy. A fall from the tree was apparent, broken bones were evident, internal injuries

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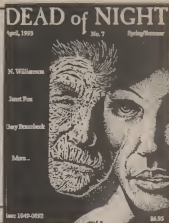
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were likely. What baffled him was the pale, seemingly bloodless condition of the body, given the absence of any major laceration or evidence of massive hemorrhaging.

The coroner stooped to examine the deceased. Why, he wondered, were the man's pants and long johns pulled down to his knees? And what, he contemplated, had caused the small, seemingly insignificant wound at the groin.

The coroner stood and motioned the paramedics. The corpse was lifted onto a stretcher, a blanket was draped over the length of the body, and the paramedics began the task of hauling their burden out of the woods.

The hunter turned silently to follow, but was halted by the sheriff's firm hand on his shoulder.

The sheriff picked something from the hunter's neck, held it between thumb and forefinger, and examined it. The hunter eyed him quizzically.

"Tick," the sheriff said. "Better check yourself over when you get home. This woods is probably loaded with 'em."



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DOUBLE BOOGIE

Rick Witherow

Rick Witherow first began placing his short fiction in various publications some three years ago. He has also completed several novels which are now "making the rounds" at publishing houses.

A faint trace of moonlight violated the darkness of the bedroom. The silver speck of light glinted off the viscous course of pea green drool rolling from the tattered lip of the boogieman who stood now just outside the closet. Five feet away eight-year-old Katy Christopher lay fast asleep.

The digital clock on the nightstand flashed: 11:23.

Suddenly, from a curtain behind the boogieman, came a coarse, low voice in a whisper. "Hey! What are you doing?"

The boogieman turned, his claw-like hands already raised to scare the slumbering child. His yellow tongue rolled back in surprise. "Who are you?"

From behind the curtain stepped a foul creature equally as tall and abominable. His voice cracked with emphasis. "I'm Walter. I'm the boogieman around here."

"I beg your pardon," whispered the first boogieman. "My name is Radcliffe and I was here first."

"Doesn't make any difference," Walter said. "I'm scarier and I'm here now so go away. I have work to do."

Radcliffe shook his lopsided head vehemently. Earthworms and oozing pus fell out of his thin, matted black hair. "I have first rights. I've been the boogieman in this neighborhood since they built this subdivision during Eisenhower's second term. So there."

"Sorry," Walter countered. Not to be outdone, he shook his narrow, angular head. A colony of cockroaches scattered from his spiked white hair and ran down his thick neck under his black, ragged cape. "You've scared every kid in this neighborhood except Katy here. It's a hundred per cent or nothing. So, you've lost your rights under the contract."

"Oh no," Radcliffe protested. "I get ten chances, and I've only used nine. And I've been practicing in the closet all day while she was at school. This time, I'm really gonna do it, boy. She isn't going to think it's just a nightmare this time. So--so don't be in such a hurry. What's the matter, did you lose your territory?"

"Uh, well. . ." Walter scratched under his right arm, destroying a freshly spun spider web. The offended spider, a female black widow, jumped onto his hand and bit with vengeance. A moment later the spider died. ". . . see--things were getting kind of complicated because these foreign yuppies kept moving in to work at the electronics companies, and their kids didn't all understand English so good, and some of them saw some pretty scary stuff before they left their home countries and--"

"Excuses, excuses!" Radcliffe snapped.

Walter raised a gnarled, scabby index finger to his blue lips. "Shhhh. You might wake the kid before I'm ready. Or worse. The parents."

"Sorry," Radcliffe whispered. "Don't wake this kid's parents. They're horrible. They--they watch soap operas together and they read romance novels. And--and they wouldn't know a gnome from a troll. No imagination, no sense of humor, nothing. Really boring. No wonder it's been so hard scaring the kid. Her parents



won't let her watch horror movies or read anything spooky. So I think when she's seen me, she hasn't had anything to relate it to, you know?"

"Yeah," Walter agreed, with a nod. His left eye, purple, with bulging red veins, flopped out of its socket for a moment and bounced above the jagged scar on his cheek. Quickly, he brought up a taloned finger to push it back in place. "I know. I worked with a family from Italy once. And I came in with my gargoyle impersonation. But the kids had lived near Notre Dame—you know, the cathedral?—and they thought I was a mechanical downspout."

"Geez." With a sigh that rattled like a sprung window shade Radcliffe glanced at the sleeping child. "It just gets harder and harder."

"That doesn't change anything," Walter asserted. "You only get one more chance. You know the rules. So, hurry up and screw up and get out of here so I can take over."

Raising a crooked claw, Radcliffe waved him off. "Just wait till she gets a load of this." A second later he swelled up his face and sprouted warts. "See?"

"That won't work," Walter remarked. "You look about as scary as a squash. You really need to brush up on your technique. Here." He grabbed both sides of his cape and raised it. Then, he grunted, straining with clenched fangs. A moment later his nose protruded farther and farther until it curled like a snake. With a gasp he made it wiggle and writhe all around his face.

"Huh-uh," Radcliffe said. "I tried that. She thought she was dreaming about a garden hose."

"Oh," Walter's nose retracted.

"I was going to try rolling my eyes back and letting my tongue hang to my waist. This time of year my tongue's covered with scorpions." Radcliffe nodded for emphasis.

"And you call yourself a hobgoblin."

Radcliffe folded his arms defensively. "I didn't lose *my* territory. Boy, you really have a lot on the line."

"Tell me about it," Walter said. His gravel voice almost softened. "Scaring kids ain't like it was in the old days. They see so much violence and horror on the news and all those other

programs. I mean, being a boogiemani has become a really hard job. Once upon a time, about all I had to do was just step out of the closet or come out from under the bed, show my face once, and the job was done. Piece of cake. But now. . . geez! You have to shriek and jump, and train constantly to stay in shape. Twenty years ago I had a chance to buy an old covered bridge outside of Springfield and retire as a troll. I would have had it made. But no. I wanted to build up my retirement."

"Yeah," Radcliffe agreed. My cousin in Toledo got a spot haunting a big warehouse—a *really* big one—big enough for two, and he offered to go partners. But no. I wanted my independence. And now? Shoot. He has a whole chain of warehouses all over Ohio. And right after he offered me that? I'm working a house a block over, not paying attention to what I'm doing, and this mother walks into the room just as I come out of the closet."

"Oh no," Walter said.

"Yep. As soon as she flipped on that light, I turned into dustballs and rolled right under the bed. I spent three months on the end of a dustmop before I got myself back together. Just goes to show you that you gotta stay on the edge all the time."

Just then, Katy moaned in her sleep and turned over onto her back. Radcliffe shoved Walter aside and raised his claws.

Stumbling, Walter tripped on a roller skate. "Hey!" A moment later he fell flat on his back. *Thump!*

Katy sat up straight in bed with a start. Squinting, she stared at Radcliffe. "You again?"

Hanging out his tongue, Radcliffe leered at her. "Booga! Booga! Booga!"

The little girl rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Clumsily, Walter struggled to his feet. "Uh-huh. See? You blew it." He pushed Radcliffe aside. "Now watch this." A second later he reached with both claws, lifted his head off his shoulders, turned it upside down, and leaned toward Katy. Then, he crossed his eyes and bared his fangs.

"Really," she scoffed.



KLOPFER/ALCORN

Walter's contorted face drew into a disappointed frown. Slowly, he set his head back into place. "Aren't you scared, Katy?"

"Nope," she said.

Raddiffe stepped beside Walter and said, "Who do you think is scarier?"

Folding her arms, she closed her eyes in disdain. "Well, neither of you is very scary. But since you asked, I guess it's a tie."

Both boogiemens looked at each other with contempt.

The pale moonlight bounced its reflection on Katy's widening brown eyes. Glancing toward the window, she stared out at the full, cratered orb in the cloudless sky, then grinned.

While Raddiffe and Walter tried to stare each other down, coarse raven hair began to erupt from Katy's swallowing face. When she started to snort, from an elongating snout, both creatures turned slowly to look at her.

Both blinked their hideous, runny eyes, and watched for the next ten second while the little girl completed her transformation. When she finished, she stood up in bed—a frightfully ominous, though short, werewolf.

Raddiffe recoiled in horror, stepping back. Walter just stood there, hyperventilating.

Then, Katy reached over to the night stand.

Raddiffe saw what she was doing. He had

just enough time to yell, "No!" when the bed lamp clicked on.

Instantly, both boogiemens turned into clumps of dustballs and rolled automatically under Katy's bed.

"There," she snapped, with finality. Then she flipped off the light, laid down, and pulled the covers over herself. Under the bed, one cluster of dustballs said, "Like I told you, Walter, you really have to stay on the edge."

"You're right," the other cluster said.

"Shut up," Katy asserted above them, "or I'll get my mother's vacuum."

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by Neal Hawes



HOCUS POCUS. Bette Midler, Sarah Jessica Parker, Kathy Najimy. A Walt Disney Picture.

1693--All Hallows Eve. Three Salem witches are on the brink of immortality. They mix up (what else?) a witches brew, and feed it to a little girl. This potion loosens up her life force, enabling the witches to suck it away from her and into them. She dies, and they become younger. Her brother tries to save her, and is turned into a talking cat for his trouble, an *immortal* talking cat. The witch's plans of absorbing all the local children, thus being young forever, are foiled by the hangman's rope. They promise "to be back," but without Arnold's accent.

1993--300 years later. . .to the day. . . Halloween Eve. With a full moon and all the trimmings. A virgin (*A male one!*) lights the black-flamed candle, returning the three witches to life, but only until dawn. To avoid returning to dust, the witches have to mix up a batch of brew and vacuum out a couple of children. But first, they have to recover their spell book, which was taken by the virgin, who was told to do so by the talking cat. Confused? Things will clear up eventually.

Bette Midler plays the leader of the witches, the red-haired, Chicklet-toothed, "brains" of the group. She is the evil witch; it's her idea to make the cat immortal so he will live forever with the knowledge that he failed to save his sister. She also has fun reminding him of how he got to be a cat. She gets highly upset when the virgin suggests that her serious overbite has left her anything but beautiful.

Sarah Jessica Parker plays the blonde, empty-headed seductress of the trio. When she

turns on the heat, you can see why adolescent boys (and grown men, too) would follow her anywhere. Parker provides comedy to relieve the stress that Midler's evilness causes. She is a scene stealer, getting some of the biggest laughs in the film.

Kathy Najimy is the child-eating witch, with the ability to sniff them out wherever they are. She too, provides a comic counterbalance to Midler, helping to emotionally "lighten up" the movie. Najimy and Parker play Larry and Curley to Midler's Moe, with the interacting and physical comedy between the three being reminiscent of the Stooges.

Hocus Pocus deals with some topics that might be frightening to young children. The death of a little girl at the beginning (which, incredibly, works out in the end), several references to eating children, the ingredients in the potion, and several of the confrontation scenes might be a little much for someone of tender years. (Now they've got *me* doing it). The witches keep flipping between humor and horror, one minute funny and the next frightening. It's guaranteed that kids won't like the scene where the cat gets flattened by the bus, although in typical Disney fashion, it all turns out fine in the end.

The special effects are great! The witches get in some broom time that made me itch to get my hands on one, and the cat has to be seen to be believed!

Disney movies...not just for children anymore!

URCHEIDA

James S. Dorr

James S. Dorr is an active member of both the Horror Writers of America and the Science Fiction Writers of America. His stories have been published in *Tomorrow*, *New Mystery*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Bizarre Bazaar*, *Grue*, *Haunts*, *Science Fiction Review* and the *Borderlands II* anthology.

Picture Urcheida, just married. Radiant. She and her husband are on their honeymoon.

At half past three they check into the lodge, have the bellman take their luggage up to their suite. At four they go swimming, her black bikini matching her hair, both in stark contrast to the silvery sheen of her skin. They sun themselves on the shore by the lake, laughing, waving to other couples as if they had known her for most of their lives. At five they go back to the lodge to change.

They take their time, but at last they emerge to go to dinner, she resplendent in a three-quarter length cocktail gown, cut *just so* in front. After dinner, they talk about dancing, but finally decide to go to bed early.

They are just married.

By nine o'clock the moon has risen. The night is warm and Urcheida kisses her husband lightly, then slips out of bed.

She selects a pair of jeans, a dark blue shirt, a wide leather belt, and dresses quietly. She looks at her husband, snoring gently in the moonlight that streams through the bedroom window. She considers another kiss, but settles for placing her hand on his, for just moment, before she creeps into the suite's other room.

34 Dead of Night

There she exits unseen through the broad French windows that look out onto the lodge's grounds.

By the time she has circled the lake it is nearly ten, but several couples are still outdoors, enjoying themselves with a late night swim. One, somewhat apart from the others, has left the water. The man and the woman reach down for their clothing, but, rather than dressing, they carry it with them into the woods at the lake's far side. And Urcheida follows.

She tracks the couple, taking her time. She notes, as they step from shadow to moonlight and back to shadow, that they are young—scarcely out of their teens.

She smiles as they reach a grass-grown clearing, surrounded by a thicket of birch trees, and spread their towels to use as a blanket.

She waits and she fingers the knife at her belt as they sit down together, each watching the moonlight as it reflects in the other's eyes. They neither see nor hear her approach until she has already slit the boy's throat, and, before the girl can even scream once, she has slit her's as well.

She arranges their bodies side by side and smiles again as she looks at their features—the girl not even out of her teens. Both younger than she is. She takes her knife and inserts it first in the chest of the boy, twisting down to the heart. Then she does the same to the girl and, wiping the blade, she plunges her hands—both at once—into the gaping wounds she has created.

She carries the blood she has dipped with her hands in a small silver flask as she leaves the woods, then runs, silently, back to the lodge.

Her husband sleeps soundly, perhaps



because of the champagne at dinner. She gazes adoringly at his form as she goes to work, carefully rolling the bedroom rug up to the side of the bed. She sprinkles the blood from the flask in a circle, surrounding the bed, then rolls the rug back. She hides the container among her clothing, then goes to wash her hands and arms.

Her husband stirs.

"Urcheida?" he mumbles.

"I'll only be a moment, darling," she calls back softly. "I'm in the bathroom."

She dries herself off and slips back into bed, snuggling into his waiting arms.

Once, twice, three nights she does this.

The lodge management knows, of course, that some guests are missing, but hushes it up. But then at last, one night before she and her husband had planned to check out, the police are waiting.

A young policewoman, a rookie male cop--the identities of the new couple are something Urcheida could not have known. she takes out her knife as she has before, then screams herself as other hands grip her. She struggles as her arms are twisted behind her body. As cold, steel rings click over her wrists. And then she is silent.

"The blood of youth mingled around our bed," she finally says when she's taken downtown and formally questioned, "will

assure fertility. It will assure that we have many children."

She can tell the police don't believe her, so she explains:

"I love my husband."

Picture Anne, blonde, gentle-voiced, perfect. She and her husband have just been married.

They check into a newly vacated room in the lodge, one that has scarcely had time to be cleaned. They tip the bellman to carry their luggage up to their suite, then follow him down the long corridor, smiling and waving at other couples they pass on the way. As if they knew them.

They make plans to go to the lake first, then have dinner, as the bellman arranges their things. Anne sits on the bed.

When the bellman is finished, he reaches to hand Anne's husband the key, and his foot slips on something--perhaps on the rug. He staggers and grabs at Anne's husband's arm. Anne sees this and her body tenses.

She loves her husband.

Urcheida and Anne aren't so different, are they?



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DARK TIDE RISING

Sean Brodrick

Raised in New England and a graduate of the University of Maine, Sean Brodrick is now a senior editor for a national supermarket tabloid, the *GLOBE*. When not out running amuck on the streets of South Florida, he is chained to his computer, where his twisted imagination comes to life. His publishing credits include the magazine *After Hours* and *The Year's Best Horror Stories Vol. XIX* anthology. If you meet him, back away slowly and don't show any fear.

January 9

I have to write this down, because if I try to tell anyone, they'll say I'm just a crazy old woman. But I know what I saw.

I saw them last night when the power failed. It was a sudden blackout that plunged my house into that eerie quiet I associate with power outages. I mean, not only my house, but the whole neighborhood— even my half-deaf neighbor Emily's TV or that teenager on the next street with his hopped-up stereo. A heavy silence that's more oppressive than darkness itself.

Just as suddenly, the silence was pierced by a wail— a cry not quite human. It came from the back, where my house borders on a vacant overgrown lot— a little quarter-acre of black forest plunked down in suburbia. I wasn't immediately afraid. I walked out on the back patio to have a look.

That's when I saw them. At least a half-dozen shapes came scrambling out of the darkness toward my house.

No one would believe me if I said these shapes were neither man nor beast but both,

each one more horrible than the last, and they ran on all fours, then got up on two legs, then dropped down again. Passing clouds obscured the moon, and to make strange even stranger, when the moon did clear the clouds and touched the figures— they became almost transparent! When the clouds passed and the light became dim again, the shapes solidified once more, running their mad, noisy loping through the edge of the wood toward my house.

It was the noise that made me certain I wasn't imagining it all. They were large and bulky, these creatures, no forest footpads they, but twig-snapping, underbrush-crunching night marauders. I heard their breathing, a panting, almost gasping noise, and panic seized me as I backed off the patio and into my kitchen. I locked the door, but took little comfort in the deadbolt as the sizable shapes loomed outside.

Then the power surged back on. I flicked on the outside lights hoping to scare the whatever-they-were off— they were gone. Not running back into the woods, mind you, but vanished. Poof! Now who would believe that?

I didn't call the police. They had their hands full anyway, the TV being full of news about the "Big Blackout." It only lasted five minutes, but it was nationwide— some kind of EMP— electro-mago-something-or-other that even dimmed car headlights and gave the TV pretty boys something to babble about. They babbled me to sleep, because I went to bed with all the lights and TV on.

That was last night. This morning saw a huge jump in the numbers of missing persons reports. I'd escaped being a missing person— not that there's anyone to really miss me— by

37 Dead of Night

mere minutes, so I knew what I had to do. There's a Sears emergency generator nesting cozily in my garage. It switches on automatically when the lights go out. I've hung a rosary on it just for luck and have named it Rosie. And as I write this, I'm looking at my new Smith and Wesson .38 caliber pistol.

Night falls in an hour. We'll see if they-- whatever they are-- come back.

January 10

Woke up safe, sound and feeling stupid. No power outages or anything last night. Maybe I am a crazy old woman!

January 15

I wish I was crazy. It would be better than living in hell.

Last night was the new moon-- I should have guessed they'd choose a moonless night. The power went off, and Rosie clicked on, purring like some steel tiger.

Feeling smug, I switched on the TV. But there was no emergency broadcast, or broadcast of any kind. Not even white noise-- just a strange, dim pattern, as if dark shapes were pushing against the other side of the screen. And there was a noise, so faint at first that I had to turn up the volume. A beating, insistent rhythm, fast and angry and frightening.

I heard the inhuman wailing again, plus a bunch of what had to be human screams, and an ice-cold spider of fear crawled up my spine. I ran to the front windows. My lights were weaker than usual, then I saw a car drive by with dimmed headlights, like they said on TV from that EMP thingamabob. The headlights finally went out completely and the car stopped. I hear the car door open, footsteps padded on tar and pounded on the automobile's hood-- and a scream! Shapes wrestled at the edge of the light-- then my lights dimmed even further and I fled from the window.

Over the course of the night, my lights ebbed perilously. The terrible rhythm on the TV extended to the radio and even the phone. I took up a station right by Rosie and read my bible aloud to comfort me. The silence was

38 Dead of Night

pierced only by Rosie's purring motor and sudden, terrible shrieks.

How I fell asleep I don't know, but I awoke today before noon. I walked outside, expecting to see carnage by the car, but there was nothing. Not a body, not a drop of blood. I went to my neighbor's house. There was cold food on the table, but no people. The same for the next house, and the next, and finally I stood in the street and shouted "Can anyone hear me?" No one replied.

Back at my house, I shook in terror when I saw the screens of my patio shredded as if by razors, and strange smears on the glass of my windows. I'd heard scraping on the glass, like tree branches-- or long fingernails. Whose? And if they meant harm why didn't they break in?

I am too exhausted to continue. I want to get some sleep before night falls again.

January 16

Last night was more oppressive and quiet than the last. I think I heard a plane overhead but can't be sure. I also heard at least one big explosion far away. My lights dimmed again, yet still I survive.

Today, I set out to get more gas for Rosie. The streets were empty save for abandoned cars that I had to maneuver around. Some cars had crashed, apparently when their drivers, fueled by some primitive terrified impulse, abandoned logic and tried to drive without lights. Still, no bodies.

Then I saw them. Two men standing by their trucks at the Home Depot building supply store. I honked my horn and pulled up.

Their names were Dennis and Burt. Dennis was educated, but with a superior air I would have found repellant if I weren't so glad to see him. Burt was a good ol' boy from the Acreage out west of town. They greeted me warmly, though Burt had a look of shock in his eyes that wouldn't go away. When I told him I was looking for gas, he insisted on giving me two of the full five-gallon cans he had in his truck. He said he'd been collecting them at every gas station he came to.

"Where is everybody?" I blurted out. "What happened?"

Dennis laughed wearily. "That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Tell me, do you have a generator?"

"Yes."

He and Burt exchanged a look. "That's it, then. We all lived because we have generators."

"But lived through what?" I demanded.

"What is happening?"

"What did you see?" Dennis asked.

"I-I saw something. At the edge of the light. And last week, in the moonlight. I-I don't know what it was. What they were."

"Somethin' that hates light," Burt said.

"Yes," Dennis agreed. "They tried last week, but something went wrong. So they waited for the next moonless night and. . ." his voice trailed off.

"It's the Devil," Burt blurted. "My wife, she was always tellin' me and the kids we gotta accept Jesus-- my wife, she-- she didn't come back!" He turned away, hiding his tears. I patted his arm comfortingly.

"I don't believe in the Devil," Dennis said.

"But there's always been a struggle between darkness and light, right?"

"The forces of darkness!" Burt raged again.

"Yeah," Dennis cut him off. "A war, kind of. Well, a lot of wars end when one side gets an edge-- some new technology, whatever. Maybe the forces of darkness got their edge."

"But I don't understand." I asked. "What edge?"

"Does a deer understand a gun?" Dennis asked. "Does a fish understand a net? All they know is it's death. That's all we know, too."

"Me and the kids prayed by the generator all night when that was the only light left," Burt babbled. "But Lisa, she didn't, she didn't. . ."

"I prayed by my generator, too!" I added.

"Do you think it really helps?" We both looked at Dennis.

"I don't believe in prayer." Then the smug smile again. "But I do believe in two generators. I think THAT saved me."

"I can't afford two generators," I said.

Dennis grinned. "Lady, we got a deal for you."

In fact, I'd caught them burglarizing Home

Depot, though I suppose it's not really stealing anymore. They loaded the generator in Burt's truck and followed me home. In an hour, I had two generators purring side by side. Dennis examined the rosary I had put on Rosie. I hung another one on my new machine.

"I'll check on you in a couple days," Dennis said as we all exchanged addresses.

"My kids would love to meet you," Burt said.

"I'll come visit," I promised. Funny how it took the end of humanity for me to stop being a lonely old woman.

Well, they've gone and night is falling again. Time to take up position by Rosie and R2.

January 23

I have reached new depths of despair. I suppose it is selfish of me to wallow in self-pity when so many have suffered worse, but self-pity is all I have left.

After Dennis and Burt left, I endured another night of Stygian darkness, another night of strange noises and inhuman cries. The next day I went for another drive, and saw a few more scattered survivors. Most were shell-shocked like Burt-- I suppose I am lucky in that I've already outlived my loved ones. Some were furtive, and ran away when I approached. At least one was downright hostile, pointing a gun at me, and that scared me back into my house for two days.

On the third day I went to see Dennis. I found his house all right, a veritable fortress with plywood-sealed windows. But the door was ajar, battered in, and a half-empty gun lay on the floor. Judging from the bullet holes in the walls, I don't know if it did him any good.

I hardly knew him, and yet I wept at his passing. I also wondered: Was it some technical glitch, or would a prayer have saved him? Whatever it was, I somehow sensed that the forces of darkness were getting stronger.

That night, my lights dimmed to a mere glow. By the faint light I saw or imagined hideous faces peering hungrily in the windows, their obscene tongues tasting the glass. I prayed

feverishly until exhaustion claimed me.

I put off visiting Burt because the trip out to the Acreage was long, and I feared what would happen if my car died on the way. But finally, yesterday, I couldn't stand it anymore.

I found his truck in the driveway to his house. The driver's side door was ripped off, and Burt's spent shotgun lay on the ground. There was a stain on the ground beside the gun that wasn't blood-- too thin, too foul-- but I don't know what it was. I imagined Burt caught outside by the setting sun, racing home-- too late. I shuddered.

I ran up the driveway, calling for the children-- and stopped. The front door was wide open. At my feet lay a child's teddy bear, once-plush but now worn and ragged and patched where it had been loved overly much. I looked inside the house, but it was no use.

The bear is resting beside me at home now. We are all we have left in the world.

I took the shotgun too. Burt had a sackful of shells in the truck. On examination I saw they were homemade, with silver slugs.

One question haunts me the most: What do they do with the bodies?

May 15

Early summer here in Florida. And for the first time in months, I dare hope. I was used to only insects for company. I hadn't seen an animal in months-- dogs, cats, even the birds are gone. Never thought I'd miss the birds.

But the love-mad crickets perked me up. Their chirping is resounding off the empty houses. And on impulse, I turned on my TV last night-- and the murky, maddening patterns and alien rhythm was much fainter-- almost gone.

And my lights are getting brighter. I can actually see my front lawn at night-- and no monstrous shapes around my house. What's going on?

May 31

The crickets are driving me insane. Their relentless, thunderous chirping is echoing in my skull. Unencumbered by higher life forms, they seem to have multiplied until they fill the world

40 Dead of Night

with their noise, and I have to scream myself to sleep. It has been five months since Darkness fell. I cannot take another night-- or another day. I can't think of a reason to go on. I've kept myself going by saying: "Don't let them win." But who are they? And if I don't value my life, what do they win?

Tonight is the end. I'm not strong enough to commit suicide, but I'm shutting off my generators and opening my front door. At this point, death would be a welcome guest.

April 1

April Fools, on me. I never thought I'd be disappointed to wake up in the morning. But I did, and it was only me and my teddy bear in the house, and the damn crickets outside.

Dennis called it a war. Well, it seems the war has moved on, and left me behind, because no monsters disturbed my sleep.

Humanity must still exist somewhere. That's why the mysterious patterns are on the TV. The Dark Enemy-- whoever and whatever they are-- are jamming our signals. And they're so faint now because the battle has moved somewhere else. Maybe a city with a nuclear power plant the Dark can't suck dry so easily. Maybe it's New Yorkers huddled around St. Patrick's Cathedral, I don't know. But I'm going to find out.

Or maybe I'll rejoin the human race.

I'm taking the teddy bear and we're going to hit the road. I'll flip a coin for North or South, and try to find the front lines again, and some targets for my silver shotgun slugs. Maybe I'll only find the death that, like life, I so long avoided.

* * * * *



THE WRECK AT WICKHAMPTON

Scott Thomas

Scott Thomas has sold fiction to *The New Earth Journal*, *Elegia*, *Strange Days*, *Eulogy*, *Deathrealm*, *Twisted*, and others. One of his stories will receive honorable mention in the upcoming *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* from St. Martin's Press. His first art sale was made years ago, to *Dead of Night*.

Often I dream of that cold and storm-impassioned sea and a boat flitting behind the waves-- flitting and spectral with crippled sails-- flitting before the great drink took it. I dream a mad thudding blizzard of sheep, of a kiss soft and chill, of cliffs overlooking the the Atlantic's beckoning pewter.

How often I dream. . .

One

I am a man of medicine, neither charmed nor made fearful by tales fishermen tell of the sea and her mysteries. I admit that the Atlantic can be a thing of treacherous might, but until a certain night, some years back, I thought myself immune to superstitious fancy. At first I was amused when fishermen whispered of strange and marvelous creatures, of gigantic demon-squid and briefly-spied darkly glinting mermaids.

Superstitious remnants of the barbarous 1600's, one might think. Oh, I suppose there's something quaint, in an archaic sort of way, about gathering around a fire and speaking of strange aquatic lights and the ghostly voices of the drowned.

Having schooled in London, I found the village of Wickhampton a quiet, boring bit of

earth. The locals famed both land and sea and seemed as content as could be reasonably expected. One could not easily-- without some long miles of travel, that is-- escape a feeling of isolation. Indeed, I wondered, were Wickhampton to slide off into the sea would anyone notice?

The natives were good folk, by the large, but I was something of a curiosity to them. Some were suspicious of me and only slightly more accepting when I learned not to try replacing their familiar, long-standing folk remedies with my "city-learned ways," but to work alongside them. There's no loss of wisdom in compromising, I say.

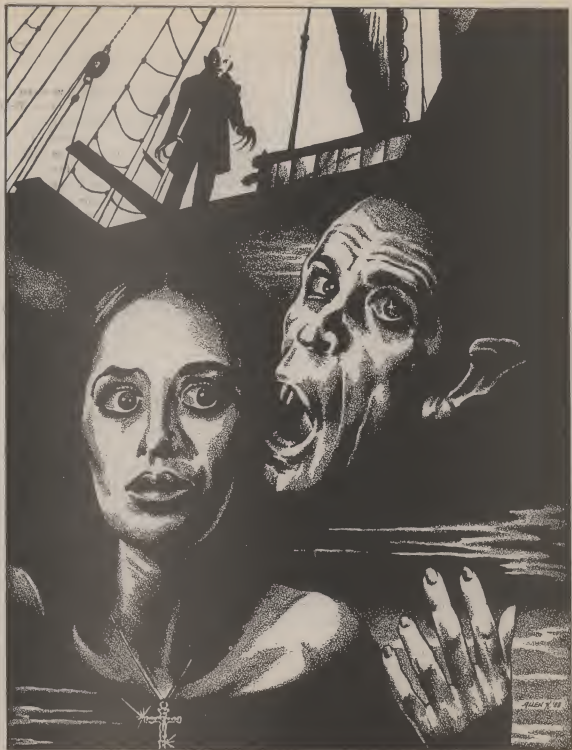
It was the dreary season of winter when the strange episode I am about to relate occurred. The days were short and gray; the rain beat down for nearly a week without respite. Not the bravest nor the foolhardy dared tempt the raucous sea. I was tucked cozily in my humble abode lazily occupying myself with good books and poor brandy when sometime between the hours of ten and midnight-- I can't recall with perfect clarity-- an eager knocking fell upon my door.

It was Harry Watkins, a gruff, always disheveled sort in his early fifties; a shepherd. The poor creature was near-drowned from the storm as he stood there shivering violently. "Doctor Miles," he panted "there's a horrid thing happened on the beach 'neath the cliffs..."

"What is it, man?" I asked.

"A wreck...oh, 'til bloody awful. Bodies..."

I made quick for a lantern, my rain gear and bag, mumbling something about idiots



going out to sea in such weather. On our way to the beach, with a roaring wet wind shaking the carriage, Watkins described a frightful scene.

"I was in my cottage when I heard the sheep out in the barn making a fearful commotion. I hurried out to calm them, thinking the storm had 'em spooked," Watkins explained. "All of a sudden I heard a queer sort of whistling, not like any wind I ever heard—it was almost like a voice. Put chills down my spine, I don't mind tellin' ya."

Watkins went on to describe how next he ventured outside and ran to the cliffs just west of his dwelling, following the sound. From that windy height he viewed the churning sea. His voice dropped as he went on. "There I saw it—a boat, no bigger than a schooner. I'd say, its sails in rags. I tell you, doctor, I felt a helpless watching it flit in and out of waves near twice its height. Then it was gone, and that strange whistling sound came once more—then it too was gone. That's when I headed down to the beach."

Two

My sleep is disturbed by dreams of bone and wood breaking, of eyes as dark as the sea's cold floor. I cower in my bed and sweat. I see a boat eaten whole by a storm and a beach like a battlefield. Lonely hours embrace me as I cry fool tears in silence. I cower in my bed and tremble.

The beach stretched long where angry waves clapped. Watkins led me squinting against the gale, pointing to the soggy pale figures splayed along the sand where the Atlantic had spit them. I knelt over the first, a woman, face down in the mud. Her full white dress seemed a film poured upon her, the ragged shawl like seaweed. It chills me still to remember the sight. Mind you, I'd seen the dead before, but to witness youth and beauty so pitifully disposed by the ill treatment of fate was nothing less than obscene. Ah, a delicate thing she'd been, lovely. There she lay with the blind gaze characteristic of one deceased; slack, with salt water pouring from her nostrils and mouth.

"There's more over here!" a voice yelled

through the howling storm. I had not noticed that the local parson and a farmer by the name of Aldrich had also reached the tragic scene.

We made our way down the beach. Splintered bits of wood had washed up along with the bodies, of which we counted four. They were all young women, all with dark hair plastered, limbs thrown like dropped dolls'. One was in a painful-looking tangle of lines.

"Looks like we've got the pilot here," Watkins noted, poking at the next corpse with the toe of his boot. The only male among them; he was bald, not terribly older than the others. There was a gory hole perhaps an inch and three quarters wide punched in the upper left region of his chest, no doubt a sorry consequence of the wreck. He was sprawled, his clothing weighted with mud, a wooden mallet clenched in one hand. I imagined that he had attempted a desperate repair effort.

"That's five," I said.

"Dear heavens!" the parson exclaimed as he stood over number six. He clapped a hand across his mouth and stepped away, cold spray drumming on his hunched shoulders.

She lay face up, her beautiful head resting on the inky pillow of her own wet hair. Never had I, nor have I since, seen eyes so dark. How I've wondered what it would have been like to gaze into them when they were filled with life.

"What do you make of that?" Watkins asked, pointing to the three brass-colored metal spikes protruding from her forehead.

I could only shrug. I was at an equal loss for words when asked my opinion concerning the shackles about her wrists. The chain which had apparently linked the bands was broken.

"There's one more," Watkins yelled above the hiss of surf and wind. I jogged over and knelt and was much relieved to find that this last form was not abody after all, but a wooden figurehead. A curious thing it was, too, rather like an upright serpent, or an eel of sorts, with a woman's breasts and a spiked crown on its head. The face was of a most malignant character, the eyes set deep and the mouth a snarl.

"What do we do now, Doctor?"

"I suggest we take them up to Mr. Watkin's and rest them in the barn until morning. We'd be wise not to attempt traveling all the way to the village in this tempest. Would that be acceptable to you, Mr. Watkins?"

"Aye, Doctor. You're all welcome to stay," the shepherd said.

We hefted the soggy bodies onto Mr. Aldrich's flat-bed cart and took the winding path up to the ledge high above the beach. From there it was a short distance to the Watkins place, an unpretentious, one might even say cozy assemblage of stone and thatch.

Three

The fever of cruel memories ravage my brief hours of sleep. What a cold and soul-less wind it is that fills the sail of my unguarded mind! I dream of a flitting boat, of men mad and dying. I hear the drumming of rain and hooves, and feel silent breasts press against my own enraged heart. How I dread the curse of sleep! The past hammers such dreams to my skull!

We crowded about the fire, damp to the bone, our emotions drained. There was nothing more we could do that night. Dark and bitter ale was poured.

"They were not of these parts," the Parson, a man of middle age, said.

"Probably foreigners lost in the storm," Watkins suggested.

Much of the discussion concerned the lass with those three dreadful spikes pounded into her head. Apparently she had been a prisoner. Why had someone put nails in her, though? I found it rather disquieting to realize that the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes upon was a corpse.

Watkins studied me, his weathered face under-lit by the fire. "Doctor Miles, what do you make of them nails, then? They're like no metal I've ever seen."

"Nor I," Aldrich echoed.

Of course I had no explanation. "I'm not sure," I said. When first I had seen the spikes, there on the rain-swept beach, I had assumed

44 Dead of Night

they were brass, or even gold, but after laying the bodies on the straw-floored barn, I bent to better study them. I cannot say with any certainty that the objects were metal. Although there was a golden quality about them, I recall there was a translucence as well, not unlike amber. Yet they were not quite stone and they were not quite metallic. They were of a substance utterly unfamiliar.

The parson flinched as kindling snapped.

Watkins wondered aloud, "Perhaps the metal is of great value..."

"I wouldn't venture to guess," said I.

Four

These dreams feast upon my drowning sanity! I see bodies on a beach, a naked woman drooling chains! I hear that shrill steam-hiss of a shriek! Sleep, I fear you! God save me from the plague of dreams! I see that cursed boat flicker and vanish. A woman of wood with a serpent's head!

I fail to find words accurate enough to thoroughly describe the sound that woke me as I lay huddled in a blanket on the floor by the fireplace. Such a strange dream had visited me! I fancied I had risen and walked out into the stormy night and gone into the dark stone barn, past the sheep bunched together for warmth, a fluttering candle my only guide.

In this slumberous adventure I approached the shadowy recess of the barn where the bodies from the beach had been stored. I stood looking down at them...figures pale and slack, vague in the dimness. I could hear the rain washing down the outer walls and the heavy breathing of the sheep.

The lovely one with the coal-black hair and features so smooth and gentle, was slumped across a work bench. The three spikes glimmered strangely; almost, I dare say, beckoningly. She smelled damp and salty and I found my trembling hand reaching to touch her clammy ankle. Ah, a chill through me! How odd, though-- the hand did not look like my own; it appeared to be that of an older man, more rugged, more like Watkin's hand. Still,

in that dream, I peeled her wet dress back and fumbled greedily at the layers until each cool and colorless inch of her lay bare before me, only warmed by the candle's tepid flickers and my hands' tremulous caresses.

Never had I seen a form of such lush beauty! How smooth the belly, how round her thighs, what plump softness her brine-pale bosom. I bent to kiss the motionless belly and dreamed my tongue across her thighs and hips. Slowly I closed my lips about the puckered tips of her breasts.

Did my ears then dream a raspy moan or did rain stealing through the old cracked walls mock my still lover's response? My mouth searched hungrily across her throat and on up to the sullen face. Never had I seen eyes so dark! I licked at the flat heads of her rigid crown of nails and languidly suckled the one in the middle. Her lips were cool against my own and the thick tongue she squirmed into my mouth tasted of the ocean's depths.

As I said-- the shrill whistle-like noise jarred me from my sleep.

"Dear God," I said in a shudder, getting up from the floor. The chill that racked me was partly due to my frightful dream and partly because the door of Watkin's cottage stood open, filling the place with damp wind. I looked about the room-- the others were not to be seen. I found a lantern, lit it and went out.

I called into the gale, "Watkins! Aldrich! Parson James!"

I staggered to the barn, the furious wind pounding against me. The door was open and a body was sprawled before me. It was Aldrich. He lay on his back, gawking at the low beams of the ceiling, his mouth in a wide, blood-rimmed O.

What a fool I was! I should have fled, but I stalked deeper into the long stone barn. The livestock rustled restlessly, watching as I passed. The sound of rain and wind grew louder as I neared the spot where we had put the victims of the wreck. The rear door, apparently, was not shut properly.

What horror! Watkins lay face down, his trousers about his ankles, at the foot of the work bench, which was empty but for a

woman's damp discarded garments. He was not far from those who drowned-- the back of his head ruptured outward. In one hand he still clenched pliers, and something small and glinting poked from his other fist. I stooped and took it...one of the mysterious yellowed spikes.

The rear door swung wide as the wind howled in and I witnessed a scene most unnerving. The figures both looked grey and ghost-vague behind the flailing sheets of rain-- the parson, naked, flat on his back, straddled by the dark-haired corpse-woman who undulated rhythmically, the chains rattling from her wrists. She turned to stare at me with scalding black eyes and an ambiguous little smile while the poor mad parson looked over and broke into maniacal laughter. How can I convey the utter fear and desperation that overcame me? I watched astonished as the woman bent over the parson, opened her mouth and launched a thick black eel straight into that poor fellow's throat. I turned to run as the hideous tongue recoiled into her mouth.

I swooned with fear, I stumbled, drowning in the internal rush of my own maddened blood. The floor was slick with gore and straw--I fell! *Dear God, help me!* I thought. I saw the woman bound in and kneel over the body of Watkins. It appeared as if she whispered something close into his gaping mouth and then he sat forward and pulled himself upright! She repeated this action with those we had transported from the beach and they also became animated.

I scrambled to my feet and sprang over the form of Aldrich, dashing out into the storm. Powered by a terror beyond measure, I ran blindly, glancing back to see the dark-haired woman, now missing the middle spike from her forehead, chasing a flock of frightened sheep. Charging along behind her were the parson, Aldrich, Watkins and the others from the beach.

Had I been of clearer mind, or had it not been raining in so blinding a density, I would have made my escape in a different direction, for I realized too late that I was running directly toward the edge of the steep grassy cliff that overlooked the sea.

I turned, still clutching the woman's spike,

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as a blizzard of sheep thumped against and by me. The poor distressed beasts plunged onward, off the ledge, splashing and pounding below. Then I faced only the human stampede, if *human* was what those rushing, sneering creatures were! I gawked as the eel-tongued woman led her wretched pack.

I turned away, no longer able to face my certain doom, and in a final expression of panicked rage, flung the spike far into the tumult of waves. Once more the shrill whistling came-- closer and closer, as if it were issuing from the uncorked hole in the woman's forehead. I turned in time to see the charging bodies closing on me in a wall-like formation, when, to my utter surprise, they ran past me on either side, leaping off the cliff, and dropping one by one into the wild surf below.

Five

Often I dream of a ship flitting through steel-colored waves, of sheep, of rain, and of a banshee-wild whistling. I dream of a woman with a serpent for a smile. I am cursed to dream of a sepulchral barn. . . of dead flesh 'neath my own warm lips and of blood racing and spilled!

Tonight I will sleep, yes; tonight it will end. I have put this pistol to my head, for I will dream no more!

46 Dead of Night



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MELANCHOLY OF HUMAN REFLECTION

Charles M. Saplak

Charles M. Saplak has placed stories and poems with publications such as *Star*line*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Tommorrow*, *Noctulpa & Expanse*. His first sale ever was to *Dead of Night* in its original incarnation.

Smith, the new boarder, propped the foyer door open.

He carried an awkward package, eighteen by twenty-four by three inches, wrapped in black cloth secured with red silk string.

"I can help you with that, Mr. Smith," the landlady, Mrs. Magishaw, said.

"Thank you. I'm taking it to our room."

"Oh, that's nice. Mrs. Smith gone out, has she?"

"Well, yes she's taking a little walk." Smith carried the package up the stairs. Mrs. Magishaw followed.

"What's that, Mr. Smith? A painting?"

"No."

"A certificate? A diploma? A testimonial? Not that it's my business. . ."

"None of those, Mrs. Magishaw." Smith set the package down, took out his key. He glanced over to see Mrs. Magishaw staring at the package, licking her lips.

Smith opened the door, lifted the package, and carried it into the room. Mrs. Magishaw followed him in.

"Is it a photograph, Mr. Smith? A special portrait?"

Smith undid the string, but didn't unfold the black cloth. He walked toward the door, gently
48 Dead of Night

tugging Mrs. Magishaw by the elbow. "I like you so much I'm going to tell you the truth."

Her eyes widened as she was led out of the room toward the stairs.

"You see, Mrs. Magishaw, Mrs. Smith and I aren't human. We dwell with our own kind in a city far away, a city that doesn't belong to any country, a city not on any map. We don't dislike humans, but we don't particularly like them either. We try to dwell apart.

"The problem is we don't have souls, like humans. And we *like* souls. . .

"We like to eat them.

"So we go out to collect souls. That's why we're here, and that's why you must never look into that package."

Mrs. Magishaw and Mr. Smith were by then down the stairs and in the foyer. Mrs. Magishaw was confused and frightened. . .

And then they shared a nervous laugh.

"Oh, Mr. Smith, you had me going!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Magishaw. I joke too much sometimes. . . people think I'm serious. Sorry. I'm going out on some errands. I'll be back in a few hours."

Smith walked downtown, then returned in thirty minutes. He entered his room with his left hand over his eyes. He felt around on the bed with his right hand, and rewrapped the mirror. Once sure it was covered, he sat down at the window, and lit a cigarette.

Mrs. Smith returned a few minutes later.

"Nice town, this. Wait, why is the mirror unwrapped?"

"Landlady," Smith said, slowly exhaling. He *liked* human tobacco.

"You didn't waste any time," she said. She peeled back the wrapping slightly and examined the mirror's edge. She could, by squinting and shifting perspective, see Mrs. Magishaw, her eyes wild, her hands pressed against the slick inner surface of the glass.

"Why waste time?" Smith said. "You got the request list?"

Mrs. Smith read from a scroll.

"Timid...Hateful...Vain--that should be easy--
Shy...Ugly...Skeptical...Innocent...Curious."

"Cross off 'curious,'" Smith said.



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SPECIAL HOLIDAY SUPPLEMENT

Three Christmas Tales by J.N. Williamson

For about a dozen years J.N. Williamson, *Dead of Night* consultant and columnist, has written Christmas stories which he's mailed as annual greetings from him and his wife, Mary. Some of these he has also submitted for publication; *Weirdbook*, *Rod Serling's Twilight Zone*, *Grue*, and the British *Fantasy Tales* have bought and run them.

SNOWLIGHT and **THE CAROLERS** have previously been unread by everyone but those friends or family members to whom the Williamsons sent them. **YOU'D BETTER WATCH OUT**, first published in *Twilight Zone* (February of '89), appears here in a version the author has been trying to perfect because, Jerry says, "It's a cautionary and slightly controversial tale not meant to offend anyone but to warn everyone."

1993 saw the release of three J.N. Williamson books: **DON'T TAKE AWAY THE LIGHT** from *Zebra*; the hardcover **THE BOOK OF WEBSTER'S** from Longmeadow Press; and the chapbook collection **THE FIFTH SEASON** from Three-Stones Publications, Ltd.



ILLUSTRATION BY
MARGE SIMON

YOU'D BETTER WATCH OUT A Cautionary Tale

What surprised him the most wasn't the key left in the lock but simply that he could push the door open and enter his sister's place. Just like that.

What worried him immediately when he had walked in was the silence. The kids weren't whooping to greet Uncle Dave and it was like death in there. Dave frowned.

Even if this was merely a strictly functional unit in one more stripped-down, sprung-'em-up fast complex, where else would children be, on Christmas Eve, but home? Maybe it was true Sis couldn't ever be sure they were there and maybe Dave was right in privately believing Sis didn't know what sort of weird friendships the kids were forming; she and Wally had to hold down around a hundred jobs apiece to save for a down payment and--

Detective First Class David Cramer remembered that his sister's firm was to close at three o'clock today. His watch said it was past five. Wally had even phoned during the lunch hour to let Dave know, then added that he had a "li'l lazminute shoppin'" before evening. Dave smiled humorlessly to himself. He wouldn't have thought there was much to buy for a wife and three children at the company Christmas party.

His arms burdened with packages, Dave froze an additional moment in disapproving thought, more uncle--and big brother--than cop.

But he couldn't ignore the part of him that was sleuth and the way it was insisting things were wrong. He stacked his gift-wrapped presents on a chair and set out to poke into every room of the place, trying to breathe

normally.

Wally's famous imported Irish-wool sweater lay like a dead animal on the floor of the master bedroom, a burnt-out butt was smouldering in the rug, and it peeked of booze.

"Sis? Wally?" He started down a short hallway, his own voice sounding so normal it was all wrong in that apartment. "Yo, gang!" He paused. "Kids?"

Then for an instant, standing in the doorway to Sis's strictly-functional kitchen, he thought he'd found an explanation everyone could live with. Little magnetized figures clung to the refrigerator door. Enroute to them, he expected to find a message held in place by jovial Santa or one of his elves.

But the magnet characters were a bare-chested male and a female, neither of whom Dave recognized but certainly not Mr. and Mrs. Claus. A scrap of paper fluttered to the linoleum when he had popped off one of the magnets.

Nothing whatsoever was written on the note paper, it was just sticky to the touch, and blank-like I feel, Dave reflected. The only explanation he could imagine for where everybody was involved his brother-in-law Wally coming home fast, and loaded, then hauling Sis and the kids off to a store or fast-food restaurant. But why would he do that?

Dave edged into the front room. The tree Wally had bought this year was even larger, and more pretentious than usual. The gifts under it weren't in as great a number as usual. Abruptly, he got very angry, swore out loud.

51 Dead of Night

Why in God's name did people leave Christmas trees plugged in when they left the house? It was failing to teach children a lick of common sense and there was no excuse for it.

Not that he was any great shakes of an uncle. He and his ex-wife hadn't been "ready" for kids--as if anybody ever really was. *Hell, I didn't even make little Tina's or Andy's birthdays this year, and I haven't been here since--*

Dave forced his mind to focus on the question of where Sis and family had gone, abruptly aware that he hadn't *wanted* to dwell on it. Arms akimbo, he stared at the mammoth, brilliantly-decorated fir as if it were a crystal ball or a Rubik's Cube full of sly hints and cruel calculations. Probably he was alarmed for nothing and it was just this make-believe neighborhood populated mostly by folks who imagined "home" was a place to flop whey they temporarily stopped running, drinking, doping, making out--or a place to ignore each other except for when you *hit* on them--with this beautiful tree--

Detective First Class Cramer finally realized that what was bothering him wasn't the decorated tree, but the packages under its limbs.

He crossed to it in three strides, stooped and picked up a gift with a label made out to Ollie. He shook it carefully, experimentally.

There was nothing inside. Dave would have bet his badge on it. An empty gift? TINA, said a label with a red and green border, and Dave retrieved it, found it so light he nearly let it fly out of his fingers. Then he hefted a present addressed to his other nephew, Andy, and got the same result: Emptiness. Absence of gift, even though all the packages were neatly wrapped and labeled.

Something like dizziness except that it also felt somewhat like fear--fear of the unknown--kept Dave on his knees. Just as he had known from the doorway that the familiar scene was all wrong, he knew that if he raised and shook the rest of the presents, he would not find one with anything in it. Some had been wrapped by professionals, most by Sis, Dave realized. All

52 Dead of Night

were empty, none had been opened.

What the hell was going on? (*And how can it be going on in my sister's home?*)

Experience-taught nerves on alert, kneeling, Dave stared up--craned his neck--to see the top of the tinsel-draped fir giant.

The tree's decorations were perfect until the broken, jagged shard of glass surmounting it. It was what remained of an ornamental star Wall'd said was in his family for generations. A reddish glint must be coming as reflection from the carmine bulbs. Dave's heart pounded a beat like a street cop going where he'd never wanted to go.

Yet he was jumping up and racing back out to Sis's kitchen, making connections stemming from the imported sweater crumpled on the bedroom floor and to the still-burning cigarette dropped, or ground, into the carpet, to what he'd glimpsed in the kitchen. He knew the connections were ridiculous, insane, but a great deal *was* mad these days. Instead of tearing the magnets off the refrigerator door as he'd planned, Dave stooped to stare at them, bending his back until he was approximately at the level of children if *they* were going to stick out their little arms and let a magnet attach itself to the door of a refrigerator.

Squinting, he made out the features of a red-faced, half-naked male with one of the hands fisted and a half-pleading, half-loving female face, her body clad in a smart business suit.

Dave didn't even know when he closed his eyelids. He also didn't know what kind of imagination could have done this, but he could imagine without difficulty how unbelievable the myths of Santa Claus would seem to those children sometimes summed up as latchkey children. Small human beings with an infinite capacity for belief and not much passed along to them to be believed in. Youngsters who often came and went as they pleased, with whomever or what ever, to go--where ever. Children who could wander into the unknown or unthinkable and believe *that*.

The stereo in the other room began to play carols. He'd already heard the front door open, and close, but hadn't moved. He was just



touching one of the magnets on the refrigerator, trying very hard to remember what his niece Tina, the baby, had looked like the last time he saw her. He saw instead a holiday tree that had actually been decorated for two hypothetical grownups, and the rejected or possibly vaporized gifts on the floor beneath its lower branches; and Dave realized there were no presents there at all for Sis, Wally, or their good ol' uncle.

He glanced at the blank scrap of paper that had been left under one of the magnets on the fridge, just as he heard many scuffling sounds outside the kitchen door--too many sounds for three children, or thirty--and knew there *had* been a message on it. *I'm not scared*, Dave thought, concentrating on the Christmas carol they were playing, *they're just kids*. And, in defense or justification or terror, *We all have to grow up!*

Dave caught just a flash of his gift as Ollie, Andy, and Tina wished him Merry Christmas in complete unison.

SNOWLIGHT

A Tale of Yuletide Terror

It is that kind of late afternoon in the winter when the house is becoming chilly and tauntingly silent inside. That happened overnight, after strangely balmy December weeks so warm that they seemed unnatural. You have just stepped grumpily out of the house to run an irritating Christmas Eve errand--no more in the mood for the holidays than usual--when the sun, dying for the day and probably for the season, gropes with palsied palms for your face.

You hug yourself two paces from the front door you just locked behind you and pause. Sunshine is said always to be pleasant so you smile, by rote, at "Home." You do so slowly, thoughtfully. Reflectively. (Was there the trace of a hint of finality in the sound the door made, shutting?) Behind you a cold breeze plays at the back of your neck while the sun goes on beaming into (and half blinding) your eyes. It's as if Home may have joined in some stealthy betrayal with forces you couldn't be expected to understand. Not you. You, you're always going into or out of "the house" like a mole frantically, indecisively burrowing into or out of the earth, too bothered by obligations of ordinary life to see anything--*unusually* important.

Yet like the unnoticed brittle earth of the new season, your "place" is always there, on the front lines of all seasons, exposed--passive till now--obliged to tolerate the shifting vicissitudes of a nature you encounter only when you want to. "Home"--incapable of observable change--does whatever it can to adapt to the vagaries of the time and somehow survive. Starting at it

54 Dead of Night

now you sense such things and more, perhaps, distantly. At last you see your "place" clear for the first time--

And an element within you intuits that there might have been the need for arrangements to have been made in order for Home to endure safely--arrangements of which you know precisely nothing. Not because the old "place" cannot communicate them, but because --this is the hard part-- Home can never quite *belong* to you. No, not in the primary way that it has already had to agree with relentless and unvanquishable nature; not belone one-hundred percent to someone who is always going into or out of it, without seeing.

But this is nonsense, the onset of a migraine, you tell yourself, backing part of the way down the lane to your car (*is it "yours?"*), anxious to start it and go before the first winter storm is upon you. So you get inside of something else, insert the key, understanding at a remove within yourself that you will always be excluded from whatever arrangements Home and the "natural forces" must make.

Driving, the engine dutifully humming like a monster dumb with its simple tasks, you know all that was craziness, of course. The tensions of the season, thoughts about relatives you must see, tiredness--they make for crazy thinking (the kind you would deny doing once spring comes). And yet in the crevices of your private mind you *do know* that should anything HAPPEN--should everything go all wrong on this planet, should unspeakable things be required on this (your) planet--you won't be consulted. You will not be warned. Because--in the crunch--you're a newcomer, a Johnny-come-lately to a plot

of earth that once was covered by sympathetic/copestetic growing flora, doing what it pleased; before that, it was barren and merely waiting; and you aren't and can *NOT* be attuned to what happens *out here in the open*.

You're an outsider who wants to be an insider but can't stay there either.

By the time you're telling yourself you have largely forgotten was was intuited during your brief and only time of communion with all that is permanent in "your" neighborhood, when the irksome errand has been run to make the holidays as easily passable as possible and you return home--

Fresh awarenesses dawn inside you at the second you turn the key in the ignition and kill the lights: For it is snowing, thickly and swarmingly. It has never in your adulthood seemed quite... this... *dark*.

Fumble-fingered with the paper sack containing your tradition-bound purchases, you try not to make small sounds of squealing apprehension as you slip and slide up the ebony lane to your black front door. You don't even perceive immediately that the lights in Home are turned off. You don't quite notice till you are scratching mole-like at the lock with a key that is frigid to your touch (praying you don't drop it in the snow) that there is no illumination from street lamps or from sky, from even the moon, for seemingly blocks around. You notice, then. You also realize-- is it possible?-- you are seeing solely because of the grudging illumination of... *snowlight*.

--Key pierces lock. Turns with startling ease. Door, it does not budge. A slight push, your sack beginning to numb other fingers. Door does not budge.

You gape, wiggle key and shoulder door. Door is solid rock. More. Nothing.

The door--your front door--seems to have become a part of the whole house (*your* house), it seems *welded* into the wall or never to have been separate at all.

"Where is everyone?"

Your own voice (yours alone?) shocks you badly in the lightless and ongoing new night. You thought you just whispered, but you seem to have screamed! It was so damned *loud*, so

terribly out of keeping, somehow, that it-- it surely alerted or even summoned-- *someone*. ("Someone?" The natural forces dwelling unseen on "your" plot of ground?)

You realize nobody heard or is answering you, and that seems impossible-- because your voice still hangs on the rising, biting breezes until it appears to you to have become frozen and turned into a silly cartoon arrow, an indicator, pointing you out: *"There! See? Over there!"*

And you just let the house key hang by itself in the lock to place your drippingly-sweaty palms to the front door and *shove* against it with all your might, again, and again--

The door doesn't yield, the key is expelled from the lock as if rejected and spat out; and the miserable *treasonous* thing pops into the thriving polyp of fattening, shadowed snow on the stoop.

And you yank your hands back from that door without knowing if you really *did* cry out, then--

Because belatedly you feel that the iciness of your house's front door upon your palms felt like that of human skin, improbably and impossibly stretched! Restored or reanimated, not-quite-lifeless human skin with a quantity of alien *blood* running through it!

Now, well, *now* you cast frantic glances in all directions (seeing nothing but descending snow) before squinting through the snowlight at "your place" --Home-- with new eyes, new realizations: Home has been sheathed, or enveloped --*walled in*-- by a frigid flesh as whole and devoid of accessible apertures as the epidermis of a frozen mammoth! You could fire at --*harpoon*-- this distantly-pulsating structure of decadent flesh without scratching or even pricking it!

My God, my God, I AM an outsider, comes your realization; so you give in to the urgent need to spin around in abrupt covert motion and just get the hell away--

Except the car is no longer there. *Your* automobile, *your* "wheels," seems to have driven itself out of your life! Parting snowfall forms an obliging tunnel of limited snowlight



from where Old Faithful should be --and it just. . .*isn't*. . .*THERE*.

"Think!" you shout at yourself aloud --"Do something!" You're so damned cold; the temp is clearly plummeting, the inexplicable balmy nights may as well be ten years in the past; if your car is gone and you can't enter your house --the house-- you'd better do that something soon, or. Or! *OR!*

Your neighbors, yes, the Abbotts on one side, the --the people-whose-name-you-haven't memorized-yet-- live father down the block on the other side of the street. The Abbotts, *sure!* God love and *bless* the *Abbotts!*

Except the snowlight hasn't permitted you a channel of illumination for you to make out any kind of path to the Abbott house, you've wandered farther from Home and are turned around a little; and the damn Abbotts have a driveway that plunges down to their garage, so if you veer off their yard at all, you could easily break your leg or back. And the useless damned Whatsits in the other direction could be in China for all the good it will--

StopitstopitSTOPIT, I WILL get into my own house! you decide, cramming yourself full of ferocious make-believe determination.

So you whirl toward Home, Sweet Home, prepared to dive headfirst through the picture window if that's what it takes--

56 Dead of Night

Except you can't see your "place" now, Home, at all. It might be there, sure; or over there, it's impossible to tell. Because what you're staring at now is merely a shimmering, incessantly moving curtain of drifting snowlight giving off cold like the breath of a mastodon chipped out of one-thousand generations of glacial ice. And behind the snowlight, all you can perceive in abject despair is a shadowed and surging mountain of perfectly impermeable ebony.

"Look, Mama, come look!"

Mrs. Abbott went to the window to look where the little girl pointed. She wouldn't have thought it snowed heavily enough last night for this.

Then she smiled. Those neighbors weren't very neighborly and they had certainly not seemed to have much interest in Christmas. But you certainly had to give them credit for this marvelous token of the season.

They definitely understood how to build a lifelike snowman!

THE CAROLERS

A Dark Fantasy for Christmas

Mr. Smallner squeezed his eyes shut and covered the lower part of his face with his hands.

When he opened his eyes, he still saw the sights that had offended him.

The first commercial Christmas displays of the season. Even while women in identical blue smocks were carrying away the residue of unsold Halloween costumes, other ladies in the store's official blue were bringing out items of Christmas cheer-- at least, for the people who owned the store. Ornaments and narrow boxes of slithery tinsel, the greeting cards that didn't move last year, miniature reindeer with twinkling red noses, and prohibitively priced toys advertised largely on the TV programs Mr. Smallner never watched-- why, the stuff appeared to spring from the stock ladies' hands and extend for miles, in directions computable only by NASA rocket engineers!

Technically, of course, Thanksgiving was next on the holiday calendar. Indeed, just inside the door had been an exhibit of smirking, suicidal cartoon turkeys and pert, pugnosed pilgrims toting muskets or adorable little axes. But merchants had never been notably successful persuading customers that Thanksgiving was a card-sending or gift-giving occasion; this earliest of Yule announcements yet could be viewed simply as a logical progression.

However, no one had ever convinced Mr. Smallner that Christmas was a time to purchase cards or presents for his family and friends either! He had none of the former--kinsmen--and only a societally obligatory number of the latter. Yet here he was, twenty-four hours into the calendar's eleventh month, and the people

to whom he gave good money all year were hard at work trying to make him believe he was the embodiment of Ebenezer, another shade of the universally-detested Scrooge!

Was it Mr. Smallner's fault that his parents had allotted him but one sibling, long deceased? Was he to be held up to scorn because he taught an undervalued and under-enrolled course at the university which gave him scant opportunity to socialize; should he be shamed because the woman he'd once considered marrying had selected another before he could seek her hand?

He also did not dislike people. Truth was, Mr. Smallner loved studying them -- or -- specifically, the evolution of human senses. Outsiders tended to call him a "sensualist" and that didn't endear them to a man who found the examination of stimuli's effects on the eye, ear, nose and other organs absorbingly intriguing. Merely alluding to Etienne Bonnot de Condillac to the man on the street evoked misunderstanding. Condillac, obviously, had been French. But Mr. Smallner knew in his own heart that the 18th century philosopher was correct in claiming that all knowledge was derived from the senses, and so Smallner lived by and with his convictions.

Of course, the sights, sounds, tastes and touch of each holiday as it came and went was simultaneously an opportunity for polite observation-- and an obtrusive anethma that rattled Mr. Smallner's keen sensory organs so miserably that he always suffered sensory overload by the end of each year. "Consider," he had imagined a speech he would never make: A year began with horns tooting, drunks

bangning on pans; shrieking sirens. It continued through months marked by the emerald emergence of leprechauns, careening automobile races, the blast and blaze of Independence Day-- forever ascending toward the finale. "Trick or Treat" demands screamed by costumed kiddies. Meals of burp-evoking dressing and bird. Then the most gaudy, noisome, and altogether unavoidable holiday of them all. It was absolutely--

Somewhere to his rear, a chorus caroled "Joy to the World," and Mr. Smallner collided with a counter. A toy exhibit, dislodged, spasmed and chirruped at his feet. Anticipating a dozen or so beaming singers, Mr. Smallner spun and confronted-- nothing. Recorded caroles, electronic cheer spewed from the store speakers!

Sprinting for the closest exit, he pressed his palms ineffectually to both ears.

But a cascading tenor voice pursued Mr. Smallner up the street. Lord, it was only a matter of time until the real thing materialized in front of the house. Carolers, so totally interchangeable from year to year to year that they might have been the same people who decided hundreds of years ago to pretend their feet were not frozen by the clinging snow, the exposed flesh of their faces was not frostbitten, their daily lives were not disrupted by running noses. . . sneezing. . . colds or flu. . . pneumonia--

And worse, imagined Mr. Smallner as he hurried toward his home, the *psychological effects* of the lengthiest and most pervasive holiday of all!

He bolted the door to his small one-story home after him and pretended futilely that he might guard himself this season against the poison spread by shoppers, carolers, the rest. How could it be that no one else, after all these years, was aware of the insidious dangers of Christmas? Why was it that nobody else except his long-dead idol Etienne could see that caroling posed the most hazardous risk of all to human order, to human sanity?

Did no one but he remember *eupnea*?

Eupnea. Breathing at a rate ideal for oneself. Peerless Swedenborg established that
58 Dead of Night

the movement of the brain matched that of the lungs-- not the heart. Therefore, bodily exertion and intense emotion altered one's breathing rate and were capable of preventing one from knowing he was even experiencing pain! Worse, exceptionally rapid breathing could drain carbon dioxide from one's blood, lead to *cataleptic trance*--

Which was a probable outcome, thought Mr. Smallner, of prolonged and movable singing! Good heavens, hyperventilation was just one *minor* product of the failure to respect one's personal eupnea.

Slumping in a chair, Mr. Smallner admitted it was the drastic alteration of one's day-to-day sensations that made him fret so pitifully. Any repeated activity that wasn't a part of workaday routine and became monotonous led to an alarming dimming of one's senses. A singer who strolled, caroling, was basically asleep-- and subject to the commands of his conductor. And that very monotony could conceivably become contagious to the innocent listener or bystander!

With two months to survive before Christmas, Mr. Smallner did his best to keep his anxieties in check by plunging himself into his work at the university. In order to retain his students' interest, he introduced them to the topics of sexual energy and mysticism (discreetly omitting any lapses into allied topics such as sexual magic and worship). Though the dean paid little attention to anything Mr. Smallner instructed-- the class was tiny -- it was hard to guide both the humor and the passions of his pupils if he edged too close to those topics involving encratism, erethism, and general concupiscentia.

To avoid that risk, Mr. Smallner let his preoccupation with the perils of caroling take him into a discussion of the human ear in contemporary sensual education and development. As Joux once said, "Show me your ear and I will tell you who you are, where you come from and where you are going." So Mr. Smallner explained that electronic amplification could destroy delicate cells in the hair within the membrane of one's inner ear and actually lead to believing in people or events that did

not exist. He added that persistently loud music doubled the quantity of blood to the heart, thereby further deluding the human ear.

Just before Christmas vacation, it occurred to Mr. Smallner that recorded carols were not only played virtually everywhere he went but more loudly this year than in the past. *Of course*, he understood, rushing home after one such misical encounter. Electronic machines were set at a certain level for rock and jazz, then left that way, and stores that generally didn't switch on the cursed gadgets at all only did so for reasons of Christmas sentiment and commercialism. Then they spewed out seasonal music at the same volume already set for the damnable rock n' roll!

All his insight into what was transpiring helped Mr. Smallner very little when he suffered his holiday accident.

He had been running faster than he should have been on an icy pavement-- fleeing Preston's Supermarket and its dinning loud speakers-- when he heard carols, coming at him from a car that was turning the corner. Irrate, confused, he stopped directly in the automobile's path, batting with his raised arms at an engulfment of Yule-time vocalizing.

The last thing he heard before losing consciousness was a high, tenor voice of amplified but extraordinary purity adamantly insisting upon joy to the world--

And what he heard next, while striving to regain his precious senses, was seemingly the same straining tenor calling him a "merry gentleman."

Mr. Smallner had to shout for the hospital nurse to hear him and return to turn the radio off, at which moment she assured him that his injuries were minor and he'd be back home in "plenty of time for Christmas."

Feebly, he swore to her that she was one-hundred percent right.

And when the carolers came to the hospital two days later and their harmonies reached Mr. Smallner's trained ears even before ascending to his floor, he made sure he'd be safely behind his own front door before December 25th: Cramming his bruised legs into his trousers, he reached for his mussed shirt and tie and was

out of the room before the carolers were halfway down the hall from his semi-private.

Yet he hadn't hauled himself all the way into a taxi before he heard a preternaturally high tenor voice belatedly conveying the news of an especially silent night.

This dark night was neither, a trembling Mr. Smallner believed, silent nor holy. Cold rain laid a sheen on the streets that looked like a blood-drenched sheet. And mere blocks from his home he spied a company of women and men grouped around the door of a private residence like a mob come to drag out Doctor Frankenstein and burn his Monster. Acting on a queer impulse, Mr. Smallner asked the cab driver to pause but by no means turn off the motor.

Three men, three women. Three girls, three boys. Twelve; a jury's sum. Each of them had red cheeks and a red nose; in the case of two children and one man, the proboscis gleamed with mucus. Not surprising, he reflected. All the carolers were oblivious to everything save their carol-- and of course, the unseen occupants of the besieged home. Then the front door opened upon an elderly couple, she with hand folded, he smoking a pipe. After a fond smile at the vocalizers, they went back inside the house but left the front door ajar.

"Roll your window down an inch," Mr. Smallner told his driver.

As if overhearing the whisper, a pale male face-- enraptured as death-- revolved in the direction of the taxi. A shrilling, a *familiar* tenor issued from the parted lips proclaiming that heaven and angels sang. His eyes, Mr. Smallner saw, were lost in rolls of soft fat.

Then the aging couple emerged from their house in topcoats, closed their front door, and melded with the singers. Had Mr. Smallner been Catholic, he would have crossed himself. He watched as the growing company drifted up the street like a deliberate but relentless wave.

That night, even a book by Buddenbrock and a pan of cocoa could not settle Mr. Smallner's nerves. Inexorably, number swelling, the carolers were headed toward his neighborhood, his own block. Yes, it would take them awhile.

Many neighbors remained whose privacy was yet to be encroached upon. It was conceivable he might have time to do something.

And just the awareness of that was encouraging. In cases of xenophobia, he understood, a person's ordinary daily consciousness was at times supplanted by another awareness entirely. When injurious, it was because the person had fallen into a state approximating sleep. So if he could stay constantly alert, he had a chance of preparing for the invasion of the accursed chorus. He needed to be so completely in control of all his senses that they could not penetrate and conquer his world.

Alas, Mr. Smallner's accident-- if accident it was-- had badly exhausted him. He'd had no real restoration in the hospital. Physically fleeing those who wished to serenade him into sensual somnolence was not currently possible. Their records were played anywhere he might try to limp and he could no longer run.

Well! What remained was being alert, trying to track their advancement. Mr. Smallner pondered deeply. Each recording was intended to disrupt the no-nonsense thinking of the sensuist by day. Mainly, carolers went out at night. In darkness, their motives became acquisitive and they were impelled by the drive to-- collect.

He waited roughly a week before, physically feeling better, he elected to rise and ascertain the present location of the carolers. Because he was on holiday he'd been able to keep to his house with plugs in his ears, stroking the covers of selected leather volumes and burning the right incenses. Now, though, he sensed they were nearer, he *knew* it. He had employed a wide range of methods known to the Tibetan *dugpa*, the ancient Greeks, Plato, Hobbes, and Etienne himself and his honed senses were so vigilant he was quivering. Today he could smell the scent left on his dresser thirty-one years ago by the woman he'd once loved.

And he headed unerringly for the carolers, shocked but not surprised to find they had progressed to the block behind his! There, *there*, gathered in shadow around the old duplex

60 Dead of Night

where a family called Conlin lived, the boy Jimmy an erstwhile carrier of Mr. Smallner's newspaper. Shrewdly, he studied the musical interlopers from behind some bushes, stooped slightly. Fourteen they were now; four women, four men, the children. Which was the leader, the conductor? Was it the tenor?

Mr. Smallner couldn't detect who pushed the doorbell, but they stepped back as one. A hummed, solitary note wended toward Mr. Smallner, and then they were singing. Discordant, too, he thought; suddenly off-key, intolably--

Till the wail of the tenor rose above the noises of the other like some night dog howling and grasping command.

He *was* their leader--conductor--perpetrator! That white-faced Christmas imp, eyes enshrouded in fat, fleshy cheeks stripped of color while-- while the *other* Carolers' skin blazed red from exertion and biting cold. Naturally! *Their* senses were dimmed now, the eupnea fully out of sync, their minds given over to the tenor's remorseless commands. While he sapped carbon dioxide from their blood, and led them toward the last stage of a cataleptic trance when he'd have them, when they were completely *his*!

The tenor conductor, Mr. Smallner perceived at last, was a *vampire of a kind*!

Shaky now, crouching lower behind his bush, Mr. Smallner saw the Conlin front door thrown wide. A daughter, her mother and newsboy Jimmy--eighteen now, perhaps--joined the caroling coven and turned with them to head up the block.

Mr. Smallner had two more revelations in such quick succession they were all but simultaneous: First, their number now comprised four girls, four boys, five women-- and four men. Imbalanced. Heavens, if they failed to add a fifth male voice before arriving at his own home, what might they do to restore balance?

Second, as the ghostly tenor turned, Mr. Smallner saw the shining, delicate hair in his inner ears, and it sprouted like the winter coat of a wild beast! That meant his singing vampire's heart was surely *bursting* with blood,

that his eupnea was doubtlessly the swiftest-paced in the whole secret history of concupiscentia!

Costumed brightly, the serenaders were certainly walking straight toward Mr. Smallner when he dodged and lurched apath homeward scanty three paces ahead of them, an idea taking shape in his mind.

Inside, safe for then, he began at once to spread the recent editions of his daily newspaper on the living room floor. On his knees, he searched the pages for a picture he'd noticed idly the morning when that day's edition was delivered.

There it was, and he knew why it had stayed in his memory! A photograph of Christmas carolers used for the sake of seasonal timeliness. He came upon two additional pictures similar to it, each snapped in far-off places. Then he raised the photo he had remembered to light from his floor lamp, his hands atremble.

Ten carolers, afoot. Smiling, singing as one. Including a broad-faced man with his muffler wrapped so high that his mouth and ears were concealed.

And what appeared to be the same round face in pictures taken in Montreal and Tallahassee, Florida, though no muffler had been used in the latter *and earlier* shot.

Hair spilled out from the man's ears, vividly. Grossly. Not (of course) as abundantly as tonight. The Montreal photograph had a dateline of December 11th, the one taken in Tallahassee indicated the first day of December. In Florida, the tenor was one of seven pictured; he was a third of a trio on December 1.

Mr. Smallner wondered wryly if the vampire conductor had minded the early, Halloween wake-up call ordained by the similarly greedy merchants.

As the last couple of days and nights of waiting crawled past, Mr. Smallner realized that Christmas Eve was the apotheosis for the carolers, who were seldom seen (above ground?) on Christmas itself. It was logical. Every sensual emotion and human activity was on exhibit the 24th of December, when the

world felt pregnant with possibility. To any detached observer, the true feeling for people's families and faith were as apparent as raw nerves. This year, perhaps because of the medication he was taking because of his accident, he himself had almost wished twice that he could participate minimally in Christmas without the risk of sensory overload. On those occasions Mr. Smallner had seen that it might well be the remnant of genuine affection and belief in God which he intuited that prevented him from an absolute disenchantment with life.

Now the Yuletide ghoul might plunge the world into its ultimate desensitized trance, he imagined, and it was ironic that solitary Mr. Smallner —detached scholar and teacher— appeared to be the last and only line of defense.

It was nearly eight p.m., Christmas Eve, and he sensed their proximity a mere three houses distant. He sighed deeply. Very well. Perhaps it took a sensuist of one kind to know another. But the prospect of mingling with strangers whose senses were deadened appalled him. Nobody else he knew, of course, possessed the foggiest notion of how transpowerment was achieved, so it was his duty.

Four times he had seen students become receptacles of transpowerment, which amounted to facing an acknowledged master who realized the complex network of the perfect ear could instantly accept the naked truth. It wasn't intellectual; it was that the entire body of the master's truth was projected into the open ear and sent *directly* — to the soul. No actual "hearing" per se, occurred. Transpowerment simply placed the truth in the soul, and *cleansed* it, raised it to higher levels.

Mr. Smallner felt sure his confrontation would amount to master versus master, and his hope lay in the knowledge that the pasty-faced, ghoulish choral conductor was not expecting to encounter one who had learned everything written down by Etienne de Condillae! Against Etienne, what or whom could the vampire employ in his attack?

Without another moment's warning, with

fiendish suddenness, they were outside Mr. Smallner's curtained bay window. Their first discordant groans-- not yet brought to pitch by their nocturnal leader-- alerted him and gave Mr. Smallner a chance to beat back a surge of fear. Rushing to the window, peeking out, he did a rapid head count and his heart sank.

The imbalanced total was the same as it had been, there were no additions to this corrupted choir-- not yet.

They wanted --needed--him.

For a few seconds, curtain drawn discreetly back by his hand, Mr. Smallner stood frozen in place. Unseen with the room dark, he studied the carolers' faces. It seemed appropriate they had conspired with merchants to begin their sinister season immediately after Halloween, because they were washed by his yellow porch light and looked like so many jack-o'-lanterns. In a sense they were no longer real, Mr. Smallner thought. Their faces were shiny circles for eyes and singing mouths. They were vacuous, perhaps mindless--

With the exception of the cunning tenor tucked into their midst, monstrous head tossed back, abnormally elevated voice defying the heavens. At this range, Mr. Smallner shuddered, his resolution wavered. *Joy to the World*, sang the voices, summoning him inexorably as he released the curtain a finger at a time; *let heaven and angels sing*. "But I n-never prevented them," he said in a small whisper, strengthening his will to take three short steps to the door. To open it. To join them, for how else could he engage in a war of transpowerment?

But was he already losing, was their collective mental pull *so* persuasive? Wasn't this what it always was when crowds gathered in brainless holiday singing, strangers interrupting one, standing athwart the reasoned path of self-interest, of open-minded alertness to anything one might sense or experience on the solitary journey? Surely he did not harbor some internal yearning to merge with people he did not even know one night or day each year-- and if such an unSmallner-like need dwelled within him, wasn't there a risk of wanting *more*

62 Dead of Night

than a day or an evening of contact with non-sensuists-- a graver risk of once more suffering the loss of a person for whom he'd become. . .fond?

Before the door, he reminded himself the challenge was his; he had to accept it. He was one of the special few who understood fully that Christmas awakened all the genuine human emotions. And the truth of it was, not *all* of them were unpleasant.

He opened the door when the carol ended and stepped outside, chin up.

"Come, join us," cried the woman Mr. Smallner had glimpsed once before from the taxi cab. They *know*, they *sense* it in me, he realized. "The more the merrier," called the man with a pipe, the woman's husband. "We're having lots of fun!"

"Come on, Mr. Smallner," Jimmy the ex-paper boy said, grinning. "Hey," he added, "it's nice to see you again!"

The pale leader, the tenor, caught his eye. "There's always room for one more," he declared in his piping voice, smiling.

For an instant Mr. Smallner stared at him. His eupnea was definitely disrupted upon realizing that the hair appearing to grow from the tenor's ears was actually shaggy sideburns growing *beside* his ears. "I don't know if I sing very well," Mr. Smallner admitted-- "but I have perfect pitch!"

"Then welcome--welcome!" The vampire clapping Mr. Smallner's arm snelled of wet snow and hearth-fire. He also used the same brand of after-shave as Mr. Smallner. "Get your coat, then, and one more thing!"

But Mr. Smallner was too good a sensuist not to know what it was and beat the man to it. "Merry Christmas," he said for the first time in more than thirty-one years.

He said it to himself in his mirror, too, as he was putting on his coat.

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